

TEMPEST

The smoke is at our door

by **Julia Corrado**

*Exposure to wildfire smoke is profoundly unequal, writes **Julia Corrado**. Working-class people often have little choice but to labor outdoors or in poorly ventilated buildings. Delivery drivers, agricultural workers, construction crews, warehouse workers, sanitation workers, teachers in disinvested and **poorly maintained school buildings**, and countless others continue producing value while inhaling dangerous concentrations of particulate matter.*

As a teenager, I would ride the public bus from the corner of my block to my high school each morning, watching the neighborhood of West Brighton blur behind the gossamer of dew suspended in the air as mist. On the foggiest mornings, I'd peer over the top of Grimes Hill to find the Verrazzano Bridge shrouded, the air thick enough to obscure it entirely, and the edifice all but vanished beneath an opaque sky. "I guess they forgot to put the bridge out today," my friend would joke. We'd giggle and move on to more pressing matters: midterms, crushes, who saw whom with whom at the mall. The mist was a natural backdrop, turning the world crystalline, a million minuscule jewels refracting the sunlight and diffusing the morning into a languid, rolling onset. As the bus groaned along, the droplets would part to let it pass, and there was an elegance in its cordial shifting aside to accommodate our movements, a symbiosis.

It has been many years since I watched a foggy dawn envelope the Verrazzano. And yet today the bridge still disappears, though under more precarious circumstances. Today, wildfire smog flattens buildings into vague silhouettes. New York City is an amber ghost. The smog, graceless, abides by none of mist's boundaries; it sticks to my skin, to my face, clings to my eyelashes, and embeds itself between the threads of my clothes. And I am haunted by the image of young girls on the S66 bus in West Brighton, joking to one another about a government employee forgetting to put the bridge out today. A new generation of teens might make the same quips now: "Someone's getting fired," one might joke. The other coughs in response. They should have masks on, but they do not, because they are teenagers, and for them, masks faded from normalcy three years ago. This—squinting through a neighborhood mired in murk, hacking through school gossip, heads fuzzy with carbon monoxide and Instagram reels—this is their normalcy.

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For much of the northeastern United States, the return of smoke from Canada's wildfires has become an unwelcome summer ritual. Air quality alerts have stretched across more than twenty states as [nearly nine hundred](https://cwfis.cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/en/) active fires continue to burn across Canada, sending dangerous levels of fine particulate pollution thousands of miles from their source. The fires are expected to continue burning [interminably](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/wildfire-season-into-fall-bc-9.7300222), unquenchable. Residents of New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit, and dozens of other U.S. cities find themselves locked indoors, watching an air quality index map on their phone screens display infrared globs of red and purple wading across the pinpoints of their homes.

Three years ago, when wildfire smoke from Canada suffocated New York's skies, some people here assumed it was a once-in-a-lifetime catastrophe. The effects of climate change were still contested, or even ignored. This was by capitalist design: fossil fuel-funded misinformation has manufactured political uncertainty. That strategy, however, had a time limit, only capable of existing in the space between the general public's secondarily informed understanding of the issue and their lived experience of it. This year in New York, back-to-back snowstorms

pummeled the city this winter, and repeated heat waves have already ravaged the first half of the summer. The polluted air has returned quickly enough to be recognized as patternistic. People can no longer argue whether climate change is coming when the smoke is at our door. We simply look around and know it is the inverse: we are in climate change's house, built upon the bones of capitalism, adorned with the gilt extracts of imperialism, and ornamented with a novelty rug fashioned out of a taxidermied extinct species.

Yet the extreme quickly becomes the ordinary. This phenomenon is well-documented, coined by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine* as “disaster capitalism.” Klein writes: *What we have been living for three decades is frontier capitalism, with the frontier constantly shifting location from crisis to crisis, moving on as soon as the law catches up.* This is precisely the case in the instance of the wildfires, demonstrated furthermore in the current overall narrative shift from climate denial to acceptance. Canada's boreal forests have always burned, though the scale, frequency, and intensity of these fires have increased undeniably due to rising temperatures from anthropogenic climate change. The climate crisis can thus no longer be credibly disputed, yet the economic system to which it is intrinsically tied has not changed. So the narrative has adapted in order to create another market to exploit.

*From private insurers withdrawing from disaster-prone regions while charging higher premiums elsewhere, to investment firms marketing climate-risk portfolios, to the tech promise that artificial intelligence will optimize energy use even as it drives a massive **expansion of electricity demand** (<https://www.cnbc.com/2024/11/23/data-centers-powering-ai-could-use-more-electricity-than-entire-cities.html>) through new data centers, capital profits from both producing climate instability and managing its consequences.*

Rather than mitigating environmental collapse, the perspective of inevitability allows for commercially viable solutions. Entire industries have emerged around the adaptation to a less livable world, so long as the drivers of the livability loss are not questioned. From private insurers withdrawing from disaster-prone regions while charging higher premiums elsewhere, to investment firms marketing climate-risk portfolios, to the tech promise that artificial intelligence will optimize energy use even as it drives a massive **expansion of electricity demand** (<https://www.cnbc.com/2024/11/23/data-centers-powering-ai-could-use-more-electricity-than-entire-cities.html>) through new data centers, capital profits from both producing climate instability and managing its consequences. These

industries are bought into upon the urging of governments to prepare for disasters rather than prevent them. Today's teenagers on the bus, unequipped to process urgency without a solution, may instead respond with resignation. The thing some of them feel most equipped to do, the only resource they know at their disposal, is to click 'add to cart.' For others, however, these experiences are radicalizing, and the electricity of their adolescence is channeled into **climate action** (<https://thisiszerohour.org/>).

Meanwhile, exposure to wildfire smoke is profoundly unequal. Wealthier households can remain indoors with central air conditioning and high-quality filtration systems. Many can work remotely. Working-class people, by contrast, often have little choice but to labor outdoors or in poorly ventilated buildings. Delivery drivers, agricultural workers, construction crews, warehouse workers, sanitation workers, teachers in disinvested and **poorly maintained school buildings** (<https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/18/us/school-conditions-2022>), and countless others continue producing value while inhaling dangerous concentrations of particulate matter. Research following the historic 2023 smoke event found that exposure to wildfire pollution also followed familiar patterns of environmental injustice, disproportionately affecting communities already burdened by poor air quality, inadequate healthcare access, and economic inequality. The working class bears the brunt of the various, well-documented health impacts of exposure, which in 2023 **resulted in 82,100 premature deaths** (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-025-09482-1>) worldwide. And to stay safe this time around, the onus has been placed back onto the suffering individual rather than those driving the crisis

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Local governments have largely responded with adaptation rather than transformation. In New York and elsewhere, citizens are advised to monitor the Air Quality Index, remain indoors, purchase air filters, wear respirators, and reduce strenuous outdoor activity. New York State Governor Hochul's [air quality advisory](https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-updates-new-yorkers-air-quality-advisory-expanded-entire-state) (<https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-updates-new-yorkers-air-quality-advisory-expanded-entire-state>) listed recommendations for a variety of groups, directing outdoor workers to “stay hydrated,” and for outdoor camps, schools, and childcare providers to, vaguely, “watch for symptoms and take action as needed.” These recommendations reveal the limits of capitalist climate policy and explain why neoliberal solutions are so disconnected from the scale of the crisis: safety must not disrupt profitability, and that contradiction is resolved by placing the burden back onto the workers.

This assessment is not to disregard the absolute necessity of adaptation and climate resilience measures. The most under-resourced and those that contribute the least to climate change [bear the largest brunt](https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/05/22/people-whove-contributed-least-to-climate-change-are-most-affected-by-it) (<https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/05/22/people-whove-contributed-least-to-climate-change-are-most-affected-by-it>) of its effects. Working-class communities need cooling centers, flood protection, public health infrastructure, and disaster preparedness immediately. But adaptation under capitalism means adapting workers

to conditions with no intention to improve those conditions. Climate change is often presented as a universal threat: *we are all in this together*. Yet we are not all exposed to it in the same way, and we certainly do not possess equal power to respond to it. The climate crisis is therefore also a crisis of class power, and adaptation without transformation is, in reality, an accommodation of the class divide.

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The wildfire smoke wafting from the north is noxious to our bodies as well as our expectations. The characterization of the climate crisis as inevitable obscures the fact that it is socially produced and therefore contestable. We must reject the separation between the worker and the environment, the absorption of climate politics as capitalist “common sense,” and the notion that the goal is to survive disasters more efficiently. We must push forward the thing that shatters the sedative of perceived normalcy: an alternative.

I traveled back to Staten Island, where I no longer live, one night during the height of the smog. The streetlights on the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway undulated in a gloomy haze until the mouth of the bridge opened and the bus slipped down the throat of the outer borough. Through the soot–stained window, I expected to see what I usually see on this oft–traversed route: the glittering city melting back and the inky waves washing up against a vast, dark beach ahead. But now, as I peered through the shifting slats of stringers, I found... nothing. I looked across to the windows on the other side of the aisle, and the view was identical: beyond the layer of grime clinging to the glass, a wall of blackness, as if we were suspended in a void. The residue in the air had congealed in my lungs, and my chest began to convulse in protest. I coughed and coughed, and the spit in my mouth tasted almost nostalgic, like a fine morning mist.

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