

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world. This week's guest is Professor Ashley Dawson of the College of Staten Island in the Graduate Center's English doctoral program. He currently works in the fields of environmental humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism. He is author of two recent books relating to these fields, *Extreme Cities*, Verso, 2017, and *Extinction*, O/R Books, 2016. He's also author of *A People's Climate Plan for New York City*, launched by the Climate Action Lab as part of the effort to advance the climate strike in New York City during the UN General Assembly's annual meeting last month. Welcome to The Thought Project, Professor Dawson.

Ashley Dawson: It's great to be with you.

Tanya Domi: So how did you get interested in climate change, particularly as an English scholar? It's not something most people would think at first glance would be the focus of your scholarship.

Ashley Dawson: I think my background in postcolonial studies helped to open me to it. Arguably, people in former colonized countries are on the front lines of the climate disaster. They've contributed the least in terms of carbon emissions, but the effects of the climate crisis are unraveling the most there. And so being aware of that I think made me interested in it and wanting to be active around those issues.

Ashley Dawson: So I've been doing climate justice work for over a decade, which has involved going to many of the annual meetings of the Conference of Parties organized by the United Nations, which is the forum to try and come up with mechanisms to mitigate carbon emissions. I was never actually any kind of official delegate, so I was never inside the meetings. But being outside the meetings was incredible because it was this amazing forum for social justice movements and climate justice movements.

Tanya Domi: NGOs, NGO activism. And so when you're on the margins, I've been to similar meetings, you pick up a lot of information, and I'm sure solidarity movements evolved.

Ashley Dawson: So that was a really interesting place to be. I learned a lot, and I made a lot of connections with people, and it very much shaped the academic work that I then wanted to do in subsequent years.

Tanya Domi: Your highly successful book *Extreme Cities* argues that cities are ground zero for climate change contributing the lion's share of carbon to the atmosphere. You also say that today, the majority of the world's mega cities are located in coastal

zones, just like New York City for example, yet few of them are adequately prepared for the floods that are increasingly continuing and are a menace to our shores. So what are your major takeaways? What did you come away with in writing *Extreme Cities*, and how have you used that information since the publication?

Ashley Dawson: I was interested in the ways in which cities have a lot of built infrastructure. And the way that that makes them extremely vulnerable, that played out in New York City with Hurricane Sandy of course where the subway system flooded, and our electrical power system crashed in about a third of Manhattan. And of course, coastal areas, as you said, were flooded. I teach at the College of Staten Island, and many of my students were affected. Some of them lost homes. Some of them lost family members. And commuting from where I live in Queens all the way to Staten Island, I really saw the disparities and impact of climate change. So in addition to just saying because of the highly developed infrastructures of urban life, cities are extremely vulnerable.

Ashley Dawson: The other major takeaway from my book was that cities today are also highly stratified socially, right? Cities are produced by capitalist patterns of development that are really producing rampant inequality. And people who have trouble accessing financial resources also tend to be the ones in cities who are most vulnerable and tend to be located in the portions of cities that are most vulnerable to flooding or to urban heat effects in summers, for example.

Tanya Domi: And of course, New York City is one of the most unequal cities in the world. It doesn't seem that the political leadership, while they've acknowledged inequality, they haven't really moved fundamentally in any fundamental way to address it. And I think you're right. For example, I live in Riverdale, which is probably the highest point in the city itself in all five boroughs. I live near the river, but I'm probably not going to be touched by flooding of the Hudson River if it... I can't imagine it getting that high. But nonetheless, it does affect you in your commute because, just as you said, during Superstorm Sandy, we lost tremendous access through the subways. Part of the subways were shut down for repairs for months on end, and so it affects everybody.

Ashley Dawson: You mentioned the Bronx, and I work with people in social movements in the South Bronx.

Tanya Domi: Which is across from me. It's lateral to me.

Ashley Dawson: And so not that many people know about this, but the South Bronx is home to the biggest food market in the city, one that services roughly 20 million people. And if Hurricane Sandy had struck roughly five hours later because of the movement of tides, the water wall that got pushed into the harbor would have gone all the way up and submerged Hunts Point and really inundated-

Tanya Domi: I am aware of that food facility. I am aware of that. That would be catastrophic.

Ashley Dawson: It would have been catastrophic. And in fact, part of the process that I focus on in terms of Extreme Cities is not just the way that people are vulnerable on a daily basis to climate change but how efforts to adapt cities to climate change going forward often tend to exacerbate vulnerabilities. So I looked at the plans developed by Rebuild by Design, this Rockefeller Foundation funded, designed an architecture process that tried to look at the areas most damaged by Hurricane Sandy and figure out how to climate proof them essentially. And social movements in the South Bronx were really, really angry about this because the Rebuild by Design process targeted the market and tried to figure out how to use levies and other forms of natural infrastructure to protect the market. But communities literally a hundred feet away were just left the opposite of high and dry, low and in peril.

Tanya Domi: And outside the barricade I'm sure.

Ashley Dawson: And these are communities that are already subjected to all sorts of forms of environmental injustice.

Tanya Domi: So we're talking about New York City, but one of the first cities that comes to mind obviously is Miami, obviously New Orleans when we see what happened in New Orleans just several years ago. You're talking about the whole Eastern seaboard all the way up. People in Cape Cod are extremely vulnerable. They're jutting right out into the ocean. And then of course, the bottom half of America, which is the Texas coastline and then the West coast. And so yes, we are surrounded by water, and so we have big coastlines. And the planning of these efforts to mitigate damage and to prevent damage doesn't seem to have galvanized the imagination and energy of mayors and people who work in local governance.

Ashley Dawson: No, I mean, I think precisely the opposite. Well, I guess I would focus on two different features. The one is the way that federal policies, the State with a capital S, has functioned in a way that has tried to help insulate people from danger who live in coastal regions but has actually made the situation worse, right? So our national flood insurance policy essentially pays people to move back into flood zones when their homes are destroyed. And what I found in my research was that in fact, the people who benefit from that the most are essentially the 1%. If you look at who gets the disbursements of aid from the NFIP, this flood insurance program, it's really wealthy people with second homes in coastal areas, not working class communities.

Tanya Domi: That have weekend homes or summer homes, right?

Ashley Dawson: Exactly. So we have a dysfunctional policy that pays people to move into harm's way. And it basically bails out rich people rather than the communities that

really need that. So as our coastal regions become more and more threatened by flooding, are we going to continue with these policies and just leave vulnerable poor communities in harm's way, or are we going to really focus on social justice and try to change these dynamics? And my book is trying to alert people to these inequalities.

Ashley Dawson: And the other thing that I focus on is capital and the way that particularly the process of financialization has produced irrationalities that play out in cities. So we know that over the last half century, essentially, the elites in American society and all over the world have been engaging in a very successful class war and demolishing the redistributive aspects of the postwar Keynesian welfare state. As they make more and more money, these elites have to figure out a place to stash all that dough. Where do they usually put it?

Tanya Domi: Real estate.

Ashley Dawson: One place is Wall Street, and the other major place of course is real estate. And we see that here in New York with all of these ridiculous thin pencil-like skyscrapers going up around Central Park and galloping gentrification in places like Brooklyn and even in the Bronx. And we see it in coastal regions in places like Miami. So my book goes into details about the topography of Miami. And the research, I was shocked by Miami. It's essentially built on limestone, which is like Swiss cheese. So you can't build any kind of restraining barrier to keep the water out. It'll just come out underneath. So it's a crazy place to build a city, but it keeps growing. And huge mega skyscrapers keep getting put up in these coastal areas where they shouldn't be because it's not just American elites, but global elites need to launder their money someplace.

Tanya Domi: And a lot of people from Latin America live in Miami. They bank there, and that's like a midway point to New York. Lots of Latin American elites are hanging out in Miami.

Ashley Dawson: And lots of real estate gets developed by New York capital there as well, right? And so political leaders, you mentioned how political leaders haven't really done that much earlier. I think that that's true. I think that there's a race for mayors and other urban leaders to demonstrate leadership. And so you get all of these plans to cope with climate change. And probably the most famous one was PlaNYC, which was published under Mayor Bloomberg. In fact, two different versions of it were published, and it had some great components including planting a million trees, which is obviously very important for mitigating carbon emissions. So there were good elements of it, but it also included a plan to develop all these former industrial areas like Long Island City and Williamsburg that are in flood zones. He was the real estate mayor, and real estate continues to rule in New York. So we get completely dysfunctional developments in relation to climate change and the threats that it poses.

Tanya Domi: I think mayors and people who are running cities, managing cities, this issue is going to return and return and return again. And I think I fear for devastating consequences that will repeat itself. So not only have you written this incredibly successful book, *Extreme Cities*, and I want to say something to the scientists out there that are our friends, that there's something to be said for an English professor who has written a book that's highly accessible. And I think you've done a great job as a public scholar in making this material available to people so that they can ingest it and understand it. This is not something that scientists are known for, and I really wish they could get on board and make their findings a lot more accessible.

Ashley Dawson: Thank you so much. I enjoyed telling people's stories, frontline people, mayors who are struggling to come up with policies that really cope with this huge crisis we're in.

Tanya Domi: I want to talk about that little bit later again, but you also wrote a book *Extinction in 2016*. And the headlines you say were being made at that time included existential threat confronting remaining large animals like rhinos and pandas for example. I would also throw in polar bears. Although, the devastation also includes bats and butterflies for example, researchers generally agree that the current extinction rate is nothing short of catastrophic and currently, the Earth is losing about a hundred species every single day. Wow. That's just a terrible reality.

Ashley Dawson: It's absolutely heartbreaking. It's true. What I wanted to do in that book was to really clearly identify the driving forces behind the sixth extinction. There was a book that had been written the previous year by the journalist Elizabeth Kolbert called *The Sixth Extinction*. And she talks to a lot of scientists, tells us stories, takes us to different parts of the world where the extinction crisis is playing out. So it's a wonderful book in a lot of ways, but in the final chapter, she speculates on what the forces are that are leading to this crisis. And she essentially says it has something to do with humanity's capacity to control the planet or dominate the world, and she points to someone with a chainsaw on the Amazon or someone with an ax in the Congo River basin.

Ashley Dawson: And as a postcolonial scholar, I was extremely bothered by that, to put the finger on a vulnerable person in a place like the rainforest and not understand that those people are usually driven by big industrial agricultural interests and that there's this bigger force, capitalism, that is driving the extinction crisis. And so what the book does is really to go through the history of the last 500 years and show how capitalism has driven colonialism and a mass eradication of plants and animals across that whole 500 year time span. And it's been getting much worse as we've gotten more and more intense forms of capitalist development.

Tanya Domi: And this course is just anecdotal, but when we only look at the current administration, they want to explore oil in the Arctic and the opening up of wilderness in Alaska for drilling as well. These are just so counterintuitive and fly in the face of every bit of data that exists.

Ashley Dawson: I was struck by, as I'm sure many people were, by the fires in the Amazon this summer.

Tanya Domi: Yes, most recently, yes.

Ashley Dawson: And so I started researching fires and found that there are over 16,000 fires burning around the world every single day at the moment. So deforestation is happening not just in the Amazon but in Congo and parts of Indonesia and many other places, including relatively rich countries like Russia for example. And in most cases-

Tanya Domi: Which actually threaten Moscow. In the last couple of years, it was on the outskirts of Moscow, huge fires.

Ashley Dawson: And in most cases, it is powerful wealthy interests that are driving this deforestation. Think about Brazil, Bolsonaro, the current president, was brought to power by the so called ruralista vote. These are essentially big land barons who farm beef and soy, much of it to export to the European Union, East Asia, and the United States. So there's this global capitalist economy that is driving the destruction of the planet. And I think we need to really be very clear about that and not engage in Band-Aids. Conservation is really important. We need to try and expand areas that are protected. But unless we take on an economic system that's predicated on constant growth, we're going to have continuing devastation of life to the point where we're looking at planetary ecocide. It's really sobering. And the anger of someone like Greta Thunberg at the United Nations last week is really justified.

Tanya Domi: So since your book launch in 2017, political organizing to call urgent attention to climate change has catapulted onto the world stage. In fact, most recently here in New York Greta Thunberg exploded onto the scene condemning the pretty similar and always recurring diplomats gather, and they'd talk in diplomatic jargon. And she utterly condemned them saying, "You're standing here talking about economics while the world burns and while the world is in destruction." She not only did that, but it was during, of course, I think the reason that it was very calculated, this effort, to coincide with the recent UN General Assembly Meeting that was focused on climate change, she is joined now by thousands of Generation Z activists all across the world here in the United States and around the world. I mean, you were on the margins of these meetings for a number of years, but could you have imagined this movement? I mean, it is really front and center as never before with children condemning the inability of the adults and the people who are leading us to grapple with an absolute crisis.

Ashley Dawson: I'm really excited about the extent of activism today from younger generations, the Sunrise Movement as another example of people who are pushing for a Green New Deal and for positive solutions. I mean, what I would say though is I'm not particularly surprised that this has happened because, as I said in earlier comments, I was part of movements that were grounded in the Global South. And there, frontline people have been mobilizing for a long time, and they understand what the score is. So it's about time that-

Tanya Domi: The media catches up.

Ashley Dawson: Exactly. Exactly.

Tanya Domi: I understand.

Ashley Dawson: And not just in the Global South, at these Conference of Parties meetings, I met folks from the Indigenous Environmental Network and from organizations like WE ACT, which is based up in Harlem, who have been really hammering home ideas about climate justice for decades.

Tanya Domi: It's incredible to witness, and I find it really moving. Unfortunately, in this country, not only people dealing with neighborhoods that are vulnerable to climate change and to environmental toxins, but we've been dealing with the gun crisis in America, which has really been led by young people at that level. That in the past couple of years has also been inspirational, but it's very clear the children are leading us now. And politicians better pay attention to this. They better start to realize. And I do think I've, of course, read where the Republicans are really concerned that they've lost the issue and that young Republicans clearly understand that they're also facing their demise. And they'll probably walk out of that politics. There is a possibility of that happening.

Ashley Dawson: We'll see. I hope so. I mean, my analysis of our current situation is that neoliberal capitalism is not working for the vast majority of people in this country and around the world. And so people are no longer willing to vote for centrist politicians. And I think the last election, the presidential election, is a testimony to that. What that means though is that people are willing to consider not just radical progressive measures to cope with economic and environmental crises but also extreme right wing measures. And we have a president who embodies all of that as you were commenting earlier.

Ashley Dawson: And we see the same thing happening in other parts of the world. So I mentioned Bolsonaro. He's a good example of that, right? Brazil is in an economic downturn and a political crisis. How do you deal with that? You engage in this extractivist populism. You promise people that if you just dig up more oil or coal or whatever it is, knock down more trees-

Tanya Domi: People will be okay.

Ashley Dawson: People will be okay. The gross national product will rise. Of course, that's not what's happening. It's benefiting elites both in Brazil and here in the United States. And what we're seeing, I think the kind of real danger, which is beginning to emerge, is not just climate denial but a right wing ecofascism beginning to happen. So young Republicans might be outflanked by these ecofascists who essentially are going, "Right, the climate crisis is happening. We can't deny it anymore. We have a grave crisis, diminished resources. And so we need to go around killing all the immigrants and locking down the borders." And we've already seen mass shootings in New Zealand and in this country over the last year that are animated by those ideas, so I think that's the real danger.

Tanya Domi: There's an intersection here. I would say a little shout out to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which has been funding environmental leadership development of environmental leadership in the Balkans, the Western Balkans, where I'm a regional scholar and that the region itself has experienced these devastating floods in the last several years and that there's really no government in the Western Balkans right now or Southeastern Europe that really has a comprehensive plan on how to deal with what's coming. You're talking about the entire Adriatic coast, which is Croatia, that encircles around Montenegro. And so this area is very, very, very vulnerable.

Ashley Dawson: Interesting.

Tanya Domi: It is interesting. It's something to watch. But you've been present at these meetings. And during the climate strike, which was in conjunction with the UN General Assembly meeting, you released, through the Center for Humanities here at the Graduate Center, A People's Climate Plan for New York City. No doubt there's a good reason we've already discussed Superstorm Sandy, what happened here in New York City. When you think about the damage that Superstorm Sandy caused in 2012, it was like \$70 billion in damages. It's the second costliest hurricane on record in the United States. It's surpassed Hurricanes Harvey and Maria in 2017. New York City sustained severe damage to subway lines. We've already talked about that. And in areas like the Rockaways, many people didn't even rebuild, and the Build Back project was roundly criticized too by a lot of people in the city.

Tanya Domi: So you've put together this plan, and of course as I said earlier, you assert that the city never really has produced a really comprehensive, let alone democratic, city planning process. What do you think Mayor de Blasio... He's got two years left. What should be his priorities in this area in your view?

Ashley Dawson: Well, I would love to see a process of participatory design anchored in the neighborhoods of the city. So the People's Climate Plan, and it has a question mark at the end of it because we formed this Climate Action Lab a year ago, and we had meetings. We invited activists and artists from different neighborhoods in, but it's by no means a comprehensive overview of what should happen. The

idea comes though from a process of planning, which was led by Aurash Khawarazad working with WE ACT in Harlem. And so the idea was to, over a course of six months, hold neighborhood assemblies to learn from people what they really needed, what were the factors that they felt their communities needed.

Ashley Dawson: And so this touched on economic challenges, challenges with law and order and the criminalization of the community, but then also things like the urban heat island effect, which means that people without a lot of money often don't have access to cooling facilities in summer months. And that leads to much higher levels of deaths in those neighborhoods. So how can people in those neighborhoods get access to social centers where they can find social connection, cooling when it's hot, areas that are not going to be flooded in case of something like Sandy? So these are some of the proposals which came out of that community-based research and visioning project leading to the Northern Manhattan Climate Action Manual. And so our work was very much informed by that.

Ashley Dawson: And I think what we would love to see is a similar community-driven process happening throughout the city. And we proposed CUNY actually as the base for that, right, because we have 20 campuses all across the city, and we could be using our capacity to connect with and to communicate with neighborhoods to really engage people and figure out what they need and also to bring our own knowledge about adaptation and mitigation to those communities. And so I would love to see some kind of process like that. But unfortunately, we're a long way away from that. Mayor de Blasio, when he took over from Bloomberg, changed PlaNYC to OneNYC, very much trying to say we shouldn't be a city of two different cities, a place with rampant economic inequality.

Ashley Dawson: But he has continued policies that favor real estate. And the latest example of that is his plan to develop the park along the East River. And this is an important battle that's going on right now because the plan for how to develop that area after Hurricane Sandy was put in place through the Rebuild by Design process where you had architects and designers and sociologists going and working with community organizations like the Good Old Lower East Side to come up with something that really had a lot of buy-in from the community.

Ashley Dawson: And now, the plan is just to completely dump a bunch of earth on top of the parks along the East River, and it has the community up in arms because it goes completely away from the plan that was developed. So that's a good example of how there's not only a failure of comprehensive planning for climate adaptation and mitigation, but there's also acting on the prerogatives of capital that flies in the face of what people really want in the city.

Tanya Domi: Sounds like an election issue to me.

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Ashley Dawson: I think it will be.

Tanya Domi: Well, I want to thank you for coming today and sharing your scholarship with our audience, and we will for sure have you back.

Ashley Dawson: Thank you so much for having me on.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Professor Ashley Dawson of the College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.