

Troubled waters and no bridges: The ecofascisms of an imagined global middle class

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Abstract

The article traces ecofascism in social-media commentary following a storm that affected the United Arab Emirates in April of 2024. This ecofascism is imagined by its creators as punching-up, as commentators see themselves as part of a global middle-class rejoicing at nature harming an equally imagined group of Emirati ultra-rich. Ignoring scientifically sanctioned realities of storms as products of climate change, these commentators blame cloud-seeding and techno-solutionism to cover forms of Islamophobia and ecofascism.

Keywords

Cloudseeding, UAE, ecofascism, islamophobia

I woke up late on the morning of 16 April 2024, and got dressed to do some work at the café downstairs from our apartment. I had been out storm-chasing the night before (Figure 1) with my research assistant Aisha and got home after 1 a.m. The storm had left us waiting; we had been out since 8 p.m., driving around the city of Abu Dhabi until she finally greeted us on the island of Hudayriat. It is not uncommon for storms here to leave humans in a state of suspension, as Choy and Zee (2015) suggest, borrowing from chemical ontologies. Nor is it uncommon for this state of suspension to stir up further episodes.

As I was walking to the café that morning, shoes still wet from the night before, I noticed the colors around me had desaturated (Figure 2). I was witnessing a hyperobject¹ (Morton, 2013)—a cloud so wide and so dense that it remade my vision into black and white. I stood there quietly for a good half hour, watching as the cloud advanced steadily, defiant in its thickness, changing the air in more than one way. The droplets of rain were tiny and numerous, different from what I had seen in temperate regions. The rest of the story unfurled on social media, where the next 24 h were discussed at length by influencers and journalists from all over the world. Of particular concern were headlines that untruthfully claimed that the storm was caused by the country's use of cloudseeding.

Focusing primarily on Dubai, these accounts offered the world the spectacle of a glitzy citadel under water. The rest of the seven-state federation of emirates was of no interest to the global audience.

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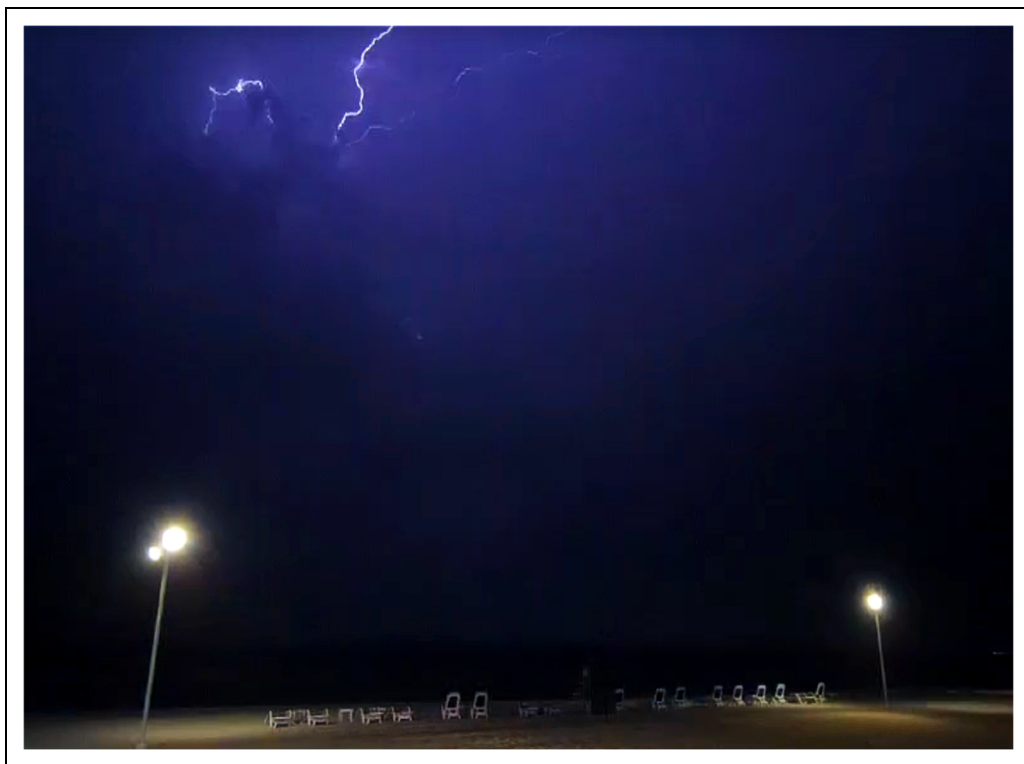


Figure 1. Storm coming onto the island of Hudayriat, Abu Dhabi, the night of 15 April 2024. Photo: Alexandra Coțofană.

As reels and live streams started pouring on social media like the very storm herself, the visual identity of the country was narrowly redrawn in the elements of a few tall skyscrapers and villas with young men jet skiing the waters set down by the storm. This oversimplification erased the socio-economic stratification and realities of the country, feeding an Islamophobic stereotype.

Just like the storm that had formed naturally over Turkey and grew as it traveled southeast (Morfin, 2024), social media focus on the storm became viral as it incorporated rumors and misreported news (Figure 3). This news claimed that the storm was caused by the UAE's cloudseeding program (the UAE Rain Enhancement Program) that has been managed by the country's National Center for Meteorology for the last 10 years. Just as this supercell grew out of a storm that formed elsewhere in the world, social media attention focusing on the UAE's weather expanded due to existing prejudice. To extend the metaphor, I contend that the misrepresentations of these events by international journalists acted as seeded clouds of their own in the already fertile atmosphere of anti-Emirati sentiments that existed on social media. Borrowing from Bhat's notion that *weather is always a method* (2021), I suggest that people are interlocutors for weather, as humans and weather constantly co-produce worlds.²

Methodologically, I allowed Instagram's algorithm to feed me news, ultimately assembling a total of 43,872 comments on 36 distinct social-media posts in at least 20 languages.³ Theoretically, my quantitative tools should have been reliable, but in reality, I had to do minute qualitative analysis of all these posts, as some of the terms used in the comments, especially ethnic slurs, would have never crossed my mind to note as keywords. The most useful quantitative-analytical tool was Voyant (Figure 4), the engine that produced the following visualization of the most common terms in the corpus of data I fed it (after editing out certain prepositions).

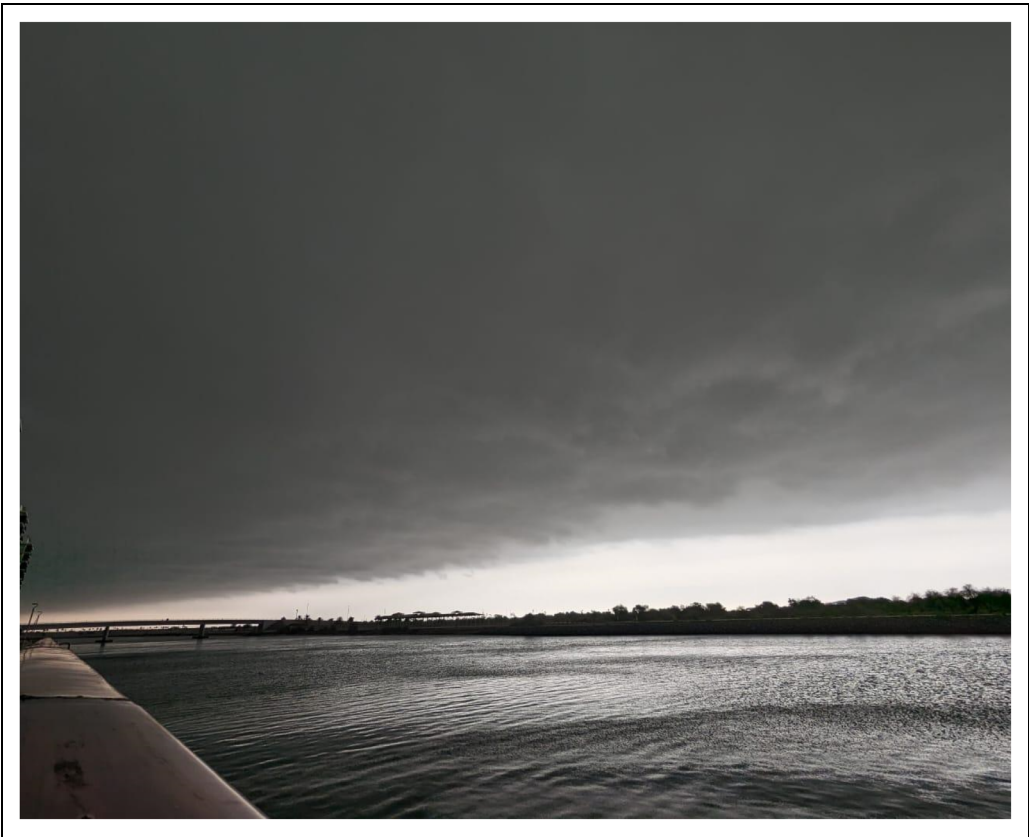


Figure 2. Supercell passing over Yas Island in Abu Dhabi. Photo: Alexandra Coțofană.



Figure 3. Social media comments revealing prejudice.



Figure 4. Data corpus visualized with Voyant.

The words that drew my attention are in the middle of this “TermsBerry” image and can be read as a sentence: Dubai; they; are; not; god. This seeming coincidence was among the themes voiced in the comments, a suggestion that by using cloudseeding, the country usurped God’s authority. The ontological weight of the phenomenon that is Dubai is undeniable. A city where wealth and technology exist at the margins of the imaginable. Many of these commentators wrongly believe that the city is the UAE’s capital, or even that Dubai is an entire country. Similarly, because of Dubai’s coastal geography, many commentators seemed to believe that the whole of the UAE is a coastal desert where it never rains (Figure 5).

It is important to highlight that these comments were written in at least 20 languages from around the world, which suggests that the audience engaging with the April storm was truly global. These reactions can tell us something about the way social media works to fertilize the seeds of Islamophobia(s), of fascism(s), and it is worth investigating the specific form of bigotry directed at Gulf Arabs, and Emiratis in particular, given the global phenomenon that Dubai represents. An examination of this corpus of data (which Voyant has aptly named “Cirrus,” after the cloud) raises several issues.

First, I argue that the semi-anonymous people who comment on these storm reports identify as part of a global middle class and thus imagine themselves to be “punching up” when rejoicing in the myriad forms of destruction brought by the storm. Commentators who embrace this sort of anti-Gulf Islamophobia do not conceive of themselves as prejudiced, but rather feel like witnesses to divine justice, as if the rich are suffering karmic retribution through an Abrahamic flood (Figure 6).

In reality, the UAE’s Emirati population generally fluctuates between 10% and 15% of the people here. And the ultra-rich envisioned by social-media commentators make up an even smaller percentage of that minority. Furthermore, of the remaining 85%–90%, a large majority are people who experience racism across much of the globe: workers from South Asia and Africa who sometimes leave their families behind in order to be able to provide for them (Lori, 2019). Caught in their ecofascist fever dream of Bible-style justice against a perceived elite, these global audiences forget to stand with those suffering at the hands of global regimes, be they political or meteorological.

The most common theme in these comments was the condemnation of the alleged misuse of a technofix (cloudseeding). A few voices tried to refute this notion by citing NASA, and explaining that the storm formed and grew naturally (Morfin, 2024). Others cited similar events that had taken place over Europe and the US in the preceding weeks, arguing that the storm was a manifestation of human-driven climate change. The critics, however, were not swayed. Many English-language commentators referred to Abrahamic religions and the theological significance of floods, fantasizing that the April



Figure 5. Social media comments claiming there is no rain in the UAE.

storm was a biblical deluge washing away a city of sinners. From there, the discourse began to echo right-wing notions of vulnerability as self-made. Concepts that govern beliefs about the (lazy and work-shy) ultra-poor also seem to apply to those understood as ultra-wealthy: their money came to them undeservedly (through the discovery of oil in the Gulf); their vulnerability is self-made as they built Western-style cities that they do not understand, made up of excess and mistranslated infrastructure. Another interesting thematic domain involves extractive thinking: the Emiratis are criticized for first extracting from the ground, then from foreign labor, and now from the sky—though the critics suckle at the same teat of extractive capitalism, merely elsewhere in the world.

The ecofascist tropes in these comments include the following assertions: the region's inhabitants should settle for the desert they were born in rather than trying to import "Western" weather by artificial means; the deployment of cloudseeding technology evinces an ultra-capitalist mentality specific to the Gulf; its overuse was the chief cause of this storm. Some of these ecofascist tropes also seem to be rooted in cognitive dissonance, as commentators claim that cities in the Gulf (unlike cities in the West) are not "natural," and that the rain here is not "real" rain.

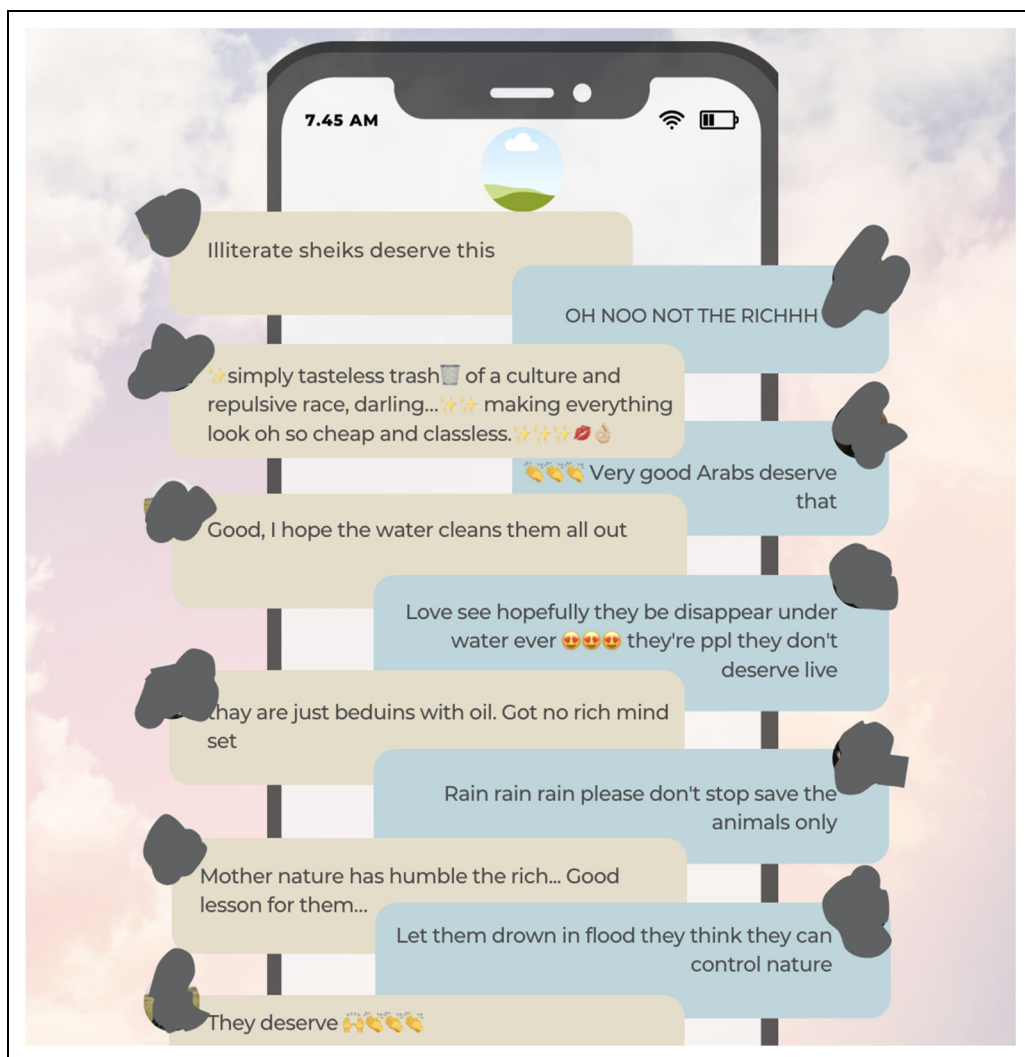


Figure 6. Social media comments imagining Emiratis in a monolithic way.

Weather is sympoiesis, it makes-itself with others (Haraway, 2016). It is, as Morton (2013) suggests, viscous, sticky, unruly, especially when co-created with people (Russell, 2023). In this process, we find ourselves in a crisis of perception regarding the weather. This crisis *is* politics, and epistemic fantasies about the weather often reveal ecofascist narratives in which selves are imagined as distinct from others. Weather is as political as it is strange (Zee, 2022); a lens into global imaginaries that are simultaneously place-bound and suspended in-between.

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Ethics and consent statement

The data for this study consisted of publicly accessible comments and posts collected from the social media platform Instagram. The data was publicly available, meaning it was accessible to any user of the platform without requiring special permissions, login credentials, or bypassing privacy barriers.

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Notes

1. Although a regular cloud would be at the margins of what Morton calls a hyperobject, I would like to invite the reader to understand the scale of this particular supercell cloud precisely as a hyperobject—non-local, but can be locally manifested, exists in different temporalities and spaces than the ones usually perceived by humans. The cloud and its immediate resulting online Islamophobia is what I refer to as the hyperobject.
2. To follow Bhat's argument, the long-term co-production of weather is important here, as extreme weather phenomena are the result of human-driven climate change.
3. These comments were written in Arabic, English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, Dutch, Hindi, Urdu, German, Italian, Indonesian, Tagalog, Greek, Turkish, Swedish, Russian, Romanian, Vietnamese, Japanese, and others.

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Alexandra Cotofana is an assistant professor of Anthropology at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi. Alexandra's research and teaching explore intersections of environmental anthropology and science and technology studies, with a particular focus on water scarcity and its possible solutions. Alexandra's current project investigates the ways in which weather scientists create knowledge about the atmosphere in general and cloudseeding in particular. She is interested in all the actors co-creating atmospheric epistemologies and their everyday lives. The project offers the public an alternative perspective on a topic that is increasingly targeted by conspiracy theories; in doing so, it hopes to curb the drop in science literacy that has recently been of major concern to scientists worldwide. Alexandra earned her PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Indiana University Bloomington, with a Doctoral Minor in Religious Studies. Prior to joining Zayed University, she held a Lectureship in History and Anthropology at Butler University.