

The influence of climate resilience governmentality on vulnerability in regional Australia

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ene**Guy Jackson** 

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Abstract

Australia is already experiencing climate change losses and damages. Australian governments and other institutional actors acknowledge vulnerability, yet they centre building resilience to climate change. Resilience is frequently used as a synonym for vulnerability reduction, but important ideological differences exist. Indeed, scholars have suggested that resilience, as a politico-ideological tool of subject formation, can be considered a type of governmentality. While there is much research on the political and ideological dimensions of resilience, there is less focus on illuminating how resilience, as a form of climate governmentality, interacts with vulnerability to climate change. Drawing on a climate ethnography in regional Australia, I ask how do resilience discourses and interventions influence vulnerability to climate change in regional Australia? To answer this question, I explore examples of the historical–structural, intersectional and psychosocial determinants of vulnerability, identify key resilience discourses and interventions and examine how, what I term, climate resilience governmentality is influencing vulnerability to climate change. Unable to identify clear causality, I instead show how resilience governmentality is working to reinforce rather than redress the root causes of vulnerability in regional Australia. I observe that resilience discourses emphasise shared responsibility, but in practice, this translates into a focus on individual capacities. Subjects' psychological dispositions are targeted and neoliberal rationalities are desired outcomes. Climate resilience governmentality is not linked to a withdrawal of the state. Instead, it is a top-down process based on government prioritisation, subject formation strategies and the building of non-governmental institutional landscapes to provide services. I argue that climate resilience governmentality is a form of governmental gaslighting because it denies the lived experiences of precarity, insecurity and structural violence throughout regional Australia. I suggest that significant government investment in regional communities, critical societal reflection and truth-telling are urgently needed to reduce vulnerability in regional Australia.

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Introduction

As increasing climate-related disasters in the Global North indicate, the affluence-as-shield narrative is becoming less compelling scientifically. This is especially true when considering low-probability, high-impact climate risks into the future (Piontek et al., 2014). Climate risks are increasingly borderless in such an interdependent and interconnected – albeit unequal – global economy (Benzie and Persson, 2019). The obscuration of vulnerability throughout affluent societies in the global climate regime has contributed to the widespread subjectivities of false security and unconcern, in addition to the denial of vulnerable Global North subjects' experiences of growing losses and damages (Jackson et al., 2023a).

For centuries, vulnerability to climate change in regional Australia – the site of this research – has been accumulating from such processes as risk-prone settlement locations and rapid urbanisation, unsustainable resource use (e.g., water, soils) and the spatial (re)production of extreme social inequalities (Lawrence et al., 2022). This accumulated vulnerability materialises through compounding extreme events, which are testing local and national capabilities. Lawrence et al.'s (2022) chapter, 'Australasia',¹ in Working Group Two of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report, states:

Existing vulnerabilities expose and exacerbate inequalities between rural, regional and urban areas, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, those with health and disability needs, and between generations, incomes and health status, increasing the relative climate change risk faced by some groups and places.

Implicit in this scientific statement is that vulnerability assessment outcomes depend on which scale is used for the analysis (Villagrán de León, 2006). Typical national-level vulnerability indicators, such as the Gross National Income and Human Development Index, suggest Australia is a highly resilient society (Birkmann et al., 2022). Conversely, if the scale is reduced to many rural, regional and urban areas, high vulnerability to climate change is apparent (Howitt et al., 2012; Veland et al., 2013; Whittaker et al., 2012). Moreover, vulnerability is relational (e.g., Eriksen, 2022; Turner, 2016). For example, wealth or other reductionist indicators fail to account for various non-static characteristics of individuals and social groups that may lead to vulnerability and 'resilience'. Moreover, when considering the full spectrum of potential losses and damages from climate change, which include more subjective 'non-economic' values such as negative impacts on identity, sense of place and cultural heritage (Boyd et al., 2021; Serdeczny et al., 2016), the relationality of vulnerability is even more apparent. Jackson (2023a, 2023b) clearly showed that losses and damages are ongoing and escalating throughout regional Australia and are affecting all social groups, but some more than others.

The Australian government acknowledges that vulnerability relates to historical and continuing inequalities within societies that increase susceptibility to climate change (AusGov, 2021a). Nonetheless, climate policy in Australia is dominated by the discourse of resilience (AusGov, 2021a). Resilience is frequently used as a synonym for vulnerability reduction, but many argue there are important ideological and material differences (Chandler and Reid, 2016; Grove, 2014; Joseph, 2013; Welsh, 2014). Whilst originally an ecological concept (Holling, 1973), resilience is now employed across societies in relation to socio-ecological processes (Cote and Nightingale, 2012; Evans and Reid, 2013; Grove, 2014; Welsh, 2014). Resilience has become a

boundary and bridging concept (Brand and Jax, 2007), with its most enduring definition linked to the idea of persistence despite disturbance in socio-ecological systems. In disaster and climate change research, resilience is linked to the term bounce back better or bounce forward (Alexander, 2013). The less ambitious ‘bounce back’ captures the discursive and political use of the concept of resilience in Australian climate policy (AusGov, 2021a).

Resilience has been studied in relation to the Foucauldian concept of governmentality (Joseph, 2013, 2016; Mavelli, 2017; Schmidt, 2015; Welsh, 2014). Governmentality analyses help to capture how power radiates through rationalities, institutions, knowledges and technologies of government (Dean, 2009; Foucault, 1991). Foucault (1982) explained governmentality as being ‘the conduct of conduct’, and scholars have shown how the complex entanglement of rationalities, knowledges and governing techniques are diffused through various interventions that seek to build resilience to climate change (De Roeck, 2019). Policies or interventions frequently go beyond articulated narrow aims (e.g., improve resilience to floods, increase risk awareness) by seeking to align the subjectivities of a population towards those so desired by those who hold power in society (De Roeck, 2019; Methmann and Oels, 2015; Welsh, 2014). Resilience is not only a scientific concept about risk or socio-ecological dynamics, as it has been shown to have ideological purposes, especially when used to justify neoliberal rationalities of personal responsibility. Joseph (2013: 40) writes that resilience ‘has been plucked from the ecology literature and used in a fairly instrumental way to justify particular forms of governance which emphasise responsible conduct’.

While there is much research on the political dimensions of resilience and even more on resilience as a property of individuals or social groups concerning climate change risk, there has been less attention on how resilience, as a form of climate governmentality, influences vulnerability to climate change. During a climate ethnography on experiences of climate change losses and damages and climate vulnerability in regional Australia during 2021, I found that diverse social and political actors used resilience ubiquitously when speaking about climate change and its management. The prevalence of seemingly unreflexively climate resilience discourses amongst decision-makers and some communities and a desire to understand its relation to vulnerability spurred me to write this paper. Here, I seek to answer the following overarching question: do resilience discourses and interventions influence vulnerability to climate change in regional Australia? To answer this question, I will:

- Explore historical–structural, intersectional and psychosocial determinants of vulnerability.
- Identify key climate resilience discourses and examples of interventions.
- Examine whether climate resilience governmentality is influencing vulnerability to climate change.

To do this, I first introduce the concept of governmentality and outline an emerging climate resilience governmentality globally and in Australia. A methodology section follows. I then justify my approach to vulnerability and detail the historical–structural, intersectional and psychosocial determinants of vulnerability to climate change in regional Australia. The next section provides key empirical examples of resilience discourse and material interventions. I then outline how climate resilience governmentality is influencing vulnerability to climate change. Finally, I provide a conclusion.

From Foucault to climate resilience governmentality

Governmentality

Foucault illuminated historical transformations of governing that have contributed to producing distinct social subjects (Foucault, 1982, 1991, 2008). Foucault (1982, 2008) recognised that initially in

Europe, sovereigns went from governing territory to governing ‘the complex of men and things’, a significant transformation of space and governmental management. Originally, sovereign power was based on the ‘right to take life and let live’, in which brute force and fear of the sovereign attempted to make subjects compliant to governors’ wills (Foucault, 1982). With the advent of capitalism, the development of nation-states, and the progression of natural and behavioural sciences, transformational change how way populations were viewed occurred (Foucault, 1982, 1991). Populations became considered productive resources that should be managed through biopower (i.e., techniques for control over whole populations) and later neoliberal power (i.e., state-driven processes that further inculcated subjectivities that aligned with free market capitalism).

Broadly, governmentality encompasses sovereign, disciplinary and governmental forms of power, which overlap and intersect (Death, 2013; Foucault, 2008). Foucault (1991, 108) suggested that governmentality is:

[T]he ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its technical means, apparatuses of security.

Foucault (1982) recognised early the centrality of political economy in the modern management of populations and that governmentality does not have a single locus of power. Power circulates through modalities of knowing, institutions, disciplinary action (e.g., military, police) and the self-government of subjects. The primacy of the market and the biological determinants of self-interestedness are recognised as desired subjectivities of those that ‘wield power that conducts’ (Foucault, 1991), and these have been linked to neoliberal power and, later, resilience theory (Chandler and Reid, 2016; Evan and Reid, 2013; Joseph, 2013).

Neoliberalism and resilience-as-governmentality

Although there are growing critiques of the overly deterministic relationship between neoliberalism and resilience (O’Grady and Shaw, 2023), the two forms of governmental rationalities share similarities and are mutually reinforcing. Neoliberalism is, however, not only about state abandonment and economic deregulation. Indeed, neoliberalism has been a successful ideological project regardless of its economic achievements – political economists have shown that far from reducing states’ role in the market, state capitalism is arguably more important than ever (Alami, 2023). Foucault (1982) recognised the instrumental role of neoliberalism in subject formation, whereby *homo economicus* is a subject who is rational, self-interested and sees the market as the ontological pre-given category and priority in life. Despite strong resistance from diverse social groups (e.g., Estes, 2019), there can be little contention that this ideology is now utterly pervasive in many parts of the world. However, Foucault’s (1991) concept of ‘counter-conduct’ recognised that subjects frequently resist imposed rationalities and desired transformations by those wielding power, which has emerged in the climate governmentality literature (Jackson et al., 2023a; Mills-Novoa et al., 2020).

Neoliberalism-as-governmentality has been investigated in socio-ecological fields such as conservation (Agrawal, 2005; Fletcher, 2010, 2017), climate change (Death, 2013; Oels, 2005) and environmental governance (Lockwood and Davidson, 2010). Neoliberal subjectification, through socio-ecological governance, attempts to instil new rationalities of nature and society, often premised on cost–benefit calculations, exchange over use value and technocratic and market-based solutions. Being a resilient subject means accepting these, amongst other, rationalities as common sense in the Gramscian sense. Here, resilience is a powerful policy object to produce

neoliberal subjects (Chandler and Reid, 2016; Evan and Reid, 2013; Gill and Orgad, 2018; Wakefield et al., 2021). Welsh (2014, 16) writes:

Resilience discourses mark a break with the modernism of the ‘risk society’ by introducing novelty, adaptation, unpredictability, transformation, vulnerability and systems into a governmental discourse that now makes the governance of uncertainty and unpredictability a hallmark of rule.

Resilient subjects should deny security, accept their vulnerability and treat inevitable catastrophes as learning experiences and opportunities (Evan and Reid, 2013; Chandler and Reid, 2016). The influence of socio-ecological systems thinking is clear here, as ecosystems do not have a preferred state, with collapse, growth and reorganisation as observable characteristics (Folke and Gunderson, 2005; Garmestani et al., 2020). Resilience-as-governmentality desires subjects who no longer expect security, take advantage of constant change and do not seek to challenge the world-as-is (e.g., structural inequalities) beyond individual or collective attempts to improve their socio-economic position. Indeed, concerning resilience-informed conceptualisations of vulnerability, Grove (2014: 244) observed that: ‘Adaptive capacity is no longer something limited by structural constraints such as race, class or gender inequalities, it now depends on individuals’ psychological dispositions and the wider cultural belief systems that affect their perceptions of self-efficacy’. The powerful narratives of overcoming adversity and ascending social classes are implicit in resilience-as-governmentality.

Is there an emerging climate resilience governmentality in Australia?

In Australia, as elsewhere, the concept of resilience has become governmental dogma, infiltrating such sectors as emergency management, health and business. The Australian National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy 2021–2025 (NCRAS henceforth) (AusGov, 2021a, 8) defines resilience as: ‘The capacity of communities, environments and economies to cope with a hazardous event or disturbance, while maintaining their essential functions and structure’. Simply put, in Australia, a resilient subject, institution or – as is most frequently stated – community can withstand shocks whether they arise from political, economic or environmental domains (Aldunce et al., 2016). I will argue that in Australia, there is an emerging climate resilience governmentality. The relative retreat of governments from providing social services and personal security, relies, to some degree, on the ethos and pathos of resilience (Beilin and Paschen, 2021; Chandler and Reid, 2016). There is some contention in the literature on whether Australia has been driven by neoliberal rationalities, with Weller and O’Neil (2014) providing nuanced arguments against the dominance of neoliberalism. However, service delivery and disaster management *has* turned away from government responsibility towards shared and individual responsibility (Beer et al., 2005; Beilin and Paschen, 2021). This emerging climate resilience governmentality is, arguably, a strategy of subject formation to condition people to become less reliant on state support in a time of multiple overlapping crises (Beilin and Paschen, 2021; Elrick-Barr et al., 2017). However, O’Grady and Shaw (2023) challenge the prevailing trope that resilience is simplistically linked to state abandonment in the neoliberal era. They show through an example of responses to COVID-19 that governments have been playing an increasingly mediatory role in disasters and emergencies, primarily through the organisation and orchestration of non-state actors in emergency response and recovery. These observations do conform with Weller and O’Neil (2014) observations on the strong role of the Federal and more importantly the state governments in Australia in orchestrating economic and social policies, as opposed to only market rationality. These, amongst other observations, emerge throughout regional Australia in relation to climate change governance.

Methodology

Anthropogenic climate change *is* a biophysical process leading to objective impacts (IPCC, 2022). However, climate change is equally a social and political process regarding cause, effects and management (Demeritt, 2001; Jorgenson et al., 2019). As I am interested in understanding how climate governance, based primarily on resilience discourses and interventions, influences socially constructed vulnerability, I employed a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology to guide the ethnographic fieldwork and data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This approach takes seriously how risk, society and environment are socially produced and experienced, while, at the same time, being non-predictive and open to inductive findings. This work builds upon recently published papers based on the same fieldwork on environmental subjectivities and temporalities of loss and damage in regional Australia (Jackson, 2023a, 2023b).

I undertook a multi-site climate ethnography in regional Australia over 10 months in 2021. Between February and October 2021, I was based in Cairns, Queensland (QLD) and travelled to Townsville (QLD) twice, totalling one month and to Darwin, Northern Territory (NT) once for one month. While in Cairns, I repeatedly visited Yarrabah, an Aboriginal community around 45 minutes' drive away, to undertake ethnographic fieldwork. I met contacts from governmental and non-governmental organisations throughout the wider Cairns and Townsville regions. A critical component of this ethnography was working closely with various organisations and social actors over long periods and using repeated observations. These social actors and groups included Indigenous groups such as the Djungan Peoples and their wider connections throughout Yarrabah and northern Australia, environmental groups around regional Australia and engagement with local and state government and non-governmental actors. Various gatekeepers were critical to the success of this fieldwork strategy. From social services organisations such as Financial Counselling Australia to local government workers and politicians, and from senior emergency managers to local environmental groups, repeated and reciprocal exchanges – many of which are ongoing – allowed rich insights to develop and be refined over time. Although completed after this fieldwork, I include an in-depth mixed-methods (survey and interviews undertaken in 2022 and 2023) study on experiences of climate change losses and damage amongst East Gippsland, Victoria, farmers and governance actors (Jackson et al., 2023b).

Although in-person exchanges were the bedrock of this ethnography, Zoom and phone interviews and meetings with actors from across regional Australia² took place with participants from all states and territories apart from Tasmania. Individual and group interviews ($n = 130$), active and passive participant observation (i.e., volunteering for environmental groups, staying in communities, visiting country, involvement in conferences, institutional ethnography), informal discussions and fieldwork journal notes and observations complete the data collection. 55 individual and 25 group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some participants preferred not to be recorded by digital recorder, and as such, 50 other interviewees agreed to be recorded in note form. All data was analysed in NVivo, both inductively to identify themes and then deductively in relation to specific questions relevant for this paper (e.g., perceived adaptation limits, determinants of vulnerability).

Vulnerability to climate change in regional Australia

To illuminate climate change vulnerability in regional Australia, I follow Eriksen et al.'s (2020) suggested focus on the historical–structural, intersectional and psychosocial determinants of vulnerability. Often overlooked in studies exploring risk in affluent contexts, which continue to focus more on 'outcome' vulnerability (O'Brien et al., 2007) or apolitical resilience (Garcia et al.,

2022), are the root causes of marginality tied to ongoing historical–structural processes of social, economic and political exclusion (Eriksen et al., 2017; Eriksen et al., 2020; Oliver-Smith et al., 2017). As established in critical climate change literature, historical structural and intersectional factors – which are strongly connected – frequently increase exposure and susceptibility of certain individuals and social groups to climate risks (Gonzales, 2021; Perry and Sealey-Huggins, 2023; Sultana, 2022). In much of the Global South, these same processes are at work. Yet, in wealthy societies such as Australia, governmental inaction cannot hide behind the reality of colonial plunder and imperialist extraction (Hickel et al., 2021). Unable to provide a systematic analysis of all the empirical examples of vulnerability in regional Australia, the following examples help to illumine some key, often-overlooked processes (re)producing uneven vulnerability. These limited examples will be reconsidered in relation to climate resilience governmentality later in the paper.

Historical–structural vulnerability

The story of modern Australia is one of omnicide (Celemajer et al., 2021; Crook and Short, 2019; Curthoys and Konishi, 2022). From the late 1700s, settler-colonial violence spread across the continent, erasing a plurality of lifeworlds through massacres, introduced invasive species and extractivism. British settlers saw this sovereign territory as *Terra Nullius*, an empty, virgin land ready for exploitation, profit and a place to send surplus labour to address the growing contradictions in the imperial core. These, amongst other colonial-linked processes, have been implicated in Australia's growing vulnerability to climate change (Ash et al., 2023).

Historical and ongoing harms to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from settler colonialism are well documented (Crook and Short, 2019; Howitt, 2020; Nethery, 2021; Watego, 2021; Wright et al., 2020). From epistemicide to political exclusion and from unequal health outcomes to educational achievement, coloniality is not an abstract concept (Sultana, 2022). It continues – through scalar, spatial and temporal processes – to produce spaces of vulnerability, which are disproportionately in postcodes with significant Indigenous populations (Howitt et al., 2012; Veland et al., 2013). One such postcode is 4871, Yarrabah, QLD. Whilst, as always, unique regarding cultures, histories, identities and politics, this empirical case illustrates some historical–structural determinants of vulnerability in majority Aboriginal communities throughout Australia.

Yarrabah was established in 1892 as a church mission. The massacres and forceful relocation of many disparate peoples to Yarrabah due to the state-sanctioned resource frontier expansion into Aboriginal lands in northern and western QLD, interrupted livelihoods, severed knowledge, obligations, responsibilities and connection to Country. One QLD academic suggested that, 'all of those forced relocation communities were deliberately put in places where they would be marginalised from the economy'. Three Djungan Elders agreed and spoke of historical factors such as being too far away from Cairns, not being allowed in the settlement apart for specific things like school, being barred from bank accounts and owning property, and other forms of general exclusion from economic, social and political life as historical drivers of vulnerability (see Jackson, 2023b). A Yarrabah informant observed, 'we are land rich, pocket poor. Dirt rich, pocket poor. However, you want to say it'. The fact that Yarrabah is highly exposed to storm surges and other coastal hazards and has poor services – despite a population of over 2500 people – were common themes raised, with one resident stating: 'Any other town this size would have real services, shops and things'. The weight of the past, continued state violence, overcrowded and poor-quality housing, physical and mental ill health and crushing poverty and despondency, coupled with high exposure to coastal hazards and increasing extreme heat, helps to illustrate how historical–structural vulnerability has been (re)produced in Yarrabah (Jackson, 2023b). The increasingly frequency and severity of extreme events and ongoing slow onset processes such as sea level rise and changing seasonality

(IPCC, 2022), are interacting with this accumulated historical structural vulnerability, which is undermining the capacities of Yarrabah residents to adapt to climate change.

It is not only Indigenous people who are vulnerable in Australia. Many drought-sensitive regions of Australia are in marginal rangelands (Phelps and Kelly, 2019). A senior NGO participant, who led an evaluation of a major drought relief programme in QLD (2020–2021), stated: ‘Historically governments put in policies and incentives to attract people to those rural areas [for food production] ... there is a feeling among people that there’s a responsibility of government to maintain services and that sort of stuff’. The perceived historical responsibility for governments to provide support was a recurring theme. In East Gippsland, Victoria, small-scale farmers reported a significant decline in services, especially in rural areas. One farmer captured this sentiment by stating ‘services have dwindled so much’. Another participant stated that there had been ‘a general decline in population and vibrancy’ in their regional QLD town. Although wealth exists in rural and regional Australia, it is unequally distributed (NRHA, 2014), with large pastoralist enterprises and mine owners and, to a lesser extent, their workers – often fly-in-fly-out – extracting the most value. Many people have been left behind. Inequality in Australia is high and rising (ACOSS, 2022; Greig et al., 2003; Morley and Ablett, 2017). Many living in rural and regional geographies have struggled to adapt to economic and social changes (NRHA, 2014). A narrative emerged amongst urban regional Australians, which indicated a perception that people who chose to live in drought-prone rural areas should move to cities instead of seeking government support. However, many rural Australians own little or no land and, due to limited formal education and capital, would struggle to move to and adapt to urban areas. This expression of immobility is especially true during an ever-worsening housing affordability crisis (ACOSS, 2022), which worsens without effective government intervention. Increasing heat, droughts, fires and flooding interact with increasingly vulnerable rural and regional geographies in Australia (Lawrence et al., 2022).

Despite relative safety narratives, urban areas in regional Australia are highly exposed and vulnerable to climate hazards. Mercantile and capitalist rationality drove settlement patterns along accessible trade routes that tended to be on the coast, along rivers and through valleys, some of which are highly exposed to natural hazards. Most major centres in regional Australia are either built on major rivers or along the coast or like Townsville both (Lloyd et al., 2020). Even when the direct need for oceanic or river freight has passed, the fixed capital in places and inertia, which is driven by, amongst other things, place attachment and long-term capital investment, means there is little appetite for planned retreat. These historical settlement and investment decisions continue to strongly influence the present-day vulnerability of urban Australians to climate change.

Intersectional vulnerability

The concept of intersectionality has become more mainstream in academia and popular culture (Salem, 2018). With this visibility, Salem (2018) explores the recent turn ‘from intersectionality as a moment of resistance to intersectionality as a neoliberal approach that erases inequality’. I acknowledge this critique and draw from more radical interpretations of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), which are intrinsically linked to the previous section exploring historical–structural processes (Crenshaw, 1989; Ferguson, 2016). Intersectional analysis helps illuminate how individuals and groups differentially experience these structural processes. Amongst other things, class, race and gender intersect to create vastly different lived experiences of climate change (Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014).

Neoliberal reforms, although less complete than in other similar economies (Weller and O’Neil, 2014), have targeted and undermined the provision of social services in Australia (Beer et al., 2005) and led to further dispossession of and structural violence against already marginalised groups

(Potter, 2020). Whilst socially progressive discourses related to anti-racism, gender equality and inclusivity have become more visible in recent decades, poverty, incarceration rates and inequality have worsened during the same period for specific groups such as Indigenous people and other lower socio-economic groups (ACOSS, 2022). Critical to neoliberal governmentality, discourses of inclusivity often hide the ongoing harms of state-driven neoliberal reforms. In a concrete example, a senior social services informant suggested that when an individual or family suffers from financial duress, domestic violence or disasters – or all of the above – to gain access to many social services, they must ‘reach a crisis point to access services... [and it is] unfortunately quite often a condition of ongoing support’. Key sectoral informants suggested that demand for such services as crisis housing for women fleeing domestic violence, homeless shelters, debt relief and psychological counselling were well above capacity and progressively worsening over time. This starkly contrasts to the growing societal discourse of social justice and care for women, racialised, and other marginalised groups. A financial counsellor working with vulnerable groups in Far North QLD – often Indigenous and other ethnic minorities – suggested ‘band aid solutions’ are being used to fix ‘systemic issues being faced by persistently vulnerable groups’. They indicated that the most marginalised people often do not seek this minimal emergency support and live on the ‘periphery of the periphery’.

Indigenous Australians continue to experience systematic exclusion from economic, social and political life (AHRC, 2018). Although government and non-government programmes exist throughout each state and territory to address inequities in health, education, income and housing, the interventions are paternalistic, surface level, reactive and are not meaningfully reducing vulnerability (AHRC, 2018). Growing up Black in Australia means being categorised as troublesome, a victim and hopeless, amongst other pathologies affixed to Black bodies (Watego, 2021). The normalisation of racism in regional Australia continues, with one Aboriginal social worker stating:

My other half is Aboriginal and I am too... Where I'm from is a racist town as well, but it's probably not so out there [i.e., blatant] like it is in Townsville... I don't go on Facebook anymore. But he will go on and he'll check people's comments and stuff like that. Like racist comments. Absolutely disgusting comments.

This process of enculturation to anti-Blackness amongst the settler population has very real material dimensions (Watego, 2021; Paradies et al., 2008). Indeed, key sectoral informants relayed that Indigenous Australians are disproportionately imprisoned, rendered homeless and make up the bulk of emergency ward admissions in northern Australia. Although incredibly diverse, similar stories emerged in discussions with Indigenous contacts in Darwin, Cairns and Townsville. A senior social worker in Townsville said there is a:

... significant overrepresentation of Aboriginal people within the prison systems in Queensland. I think it sits on a state-wide level at somewhere around 45 or 50%. In Townsville, I think, 92% in the women's [prison], mostly for Centrelink [welfare fraud].

The intersection of Indigeneity, class, gender and age is leading to compounding social crises that governmental interventions were failing to address or actively making worse (AHRC, 2018). My ethnographic work in Yarrabah captured many stories of the absolute failure of Indigenous policy in regional Australia, with the town in an almost permanent state of crisis. This is why calls for a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament emerged from the Uluru Dialogues, where, through extensive consultation around the country, there was agreement that Indigenous Peoples need to be able to influence the policies and interventions that directly affect

them (see Rigney, 2023). Devastatingly, the Indigenous Voice referendum failed, leaving a vacuum in political strategies and the realisation of self-determination. Australia's rejection of this proposal to acknowledge First Nations and enable them to have a say in the policies that affect their lives was a stark reminder of the racism and coloniality that exists.

I spoke with 47 government and non-governmental social service providers across regional Australia. All contacts, from different vantage points, spoke of the ongoing social problems driven by racism, increasing disasters, rising inequality, declining services and the housing crisis (i.e., lack of social or affordable housing). A social services stakeholder said:

... we were invited to the senate inquiry [into responsible lending obligations] so that they could hear how we saw people who have lots of points of vulnerability, not just poor, not just because of exclusion from the mainstream, and not just because of location, but you compound all that together and that just increases their vulnerability over and over and over again.

Providing a geographic perspective, an ex-governmental stakeholder stated that 'there's been a real problem of urban bias in the Northern Territory, really since settlement, but it has got worse with self-government and much worse in the last two decades', and this theme emerged in discussion with rural and remote stakeholders across Australia. A council officer in East Gippsland, Victoria (the poorest local government area in Victoria) replied to a question about why their communities were vulnerable to climate change:

There's a lot of disadvantage. If you get on, have a look, you'll see some of our communities, some of our more isolated communities, it's just like... it's all there in the figures. You look at the census data and there's no income, there's no education, it's, you know, it's just really, really bad.

Although they indicated that this statement was true regarding all social groups, they specified that Indigenous and other ethnic minorities were often the most marginalised. However, class determinants were higher predictors of vulnerability in their opinion. The same themes emerged in discussions with informants in all states and territories. Poverty, which is driven by the structural processes and the intersection of geography, race, class and gender, is being increasingly spatialised (Howitt et al., 2012; Udah et al., 2019; Whittaker et al., 2012).

Psychosocial vulnerability

Psychosocial drivers of vulnerability relate to how emotions, belonging, beliefs and knowledge influence vulnerability to climate change (Eriksen et al., 2020). These important drivers of vulnerability are often overlooked in a literature that tends to preference material conditions, but I argue they are essential to ensure a holistic understanding of vulnerability.

The harsh Australian climate, with its typical oscillation between wet and dry extremes, and the conquest by settlers who economically developed most regions apart from those most unviable, have contributed to the cultural mythos of fortitude and overcoming adversity (Bryant and Garnham, 2015). It has been documented that some Australians continue to hold a perception of having tamed the frontier (Curthoys and Konishi, 2022; Jackson 2023a). This (mis)perception is linked to a nature-culture divide that emerged in discussions with many non-Indigenous people. For example, a climate consultant suggested that they typically avoid raising extreme events when consulting local councils 'because QLD is so exposed to extreme events, everybody has an experience of disasters. You end up having a two-hour meeting where they are just sharing war stories'. Emergency services informants often used language that elicited warfare with unruly nature. Structural vulnerability was frequently obscured, whilst response and heroism of

emergency services or even local actors was illuminated and is culturally embedded (Elrick-Barr et al., 2017). A senior emergency services officer said ‘you know all our volunteers in Australia, in emergency services, seem to be constantly banded around as heroes. And people like to be a part of that’. This contributes to psychosocial dimensions of vulnerability by obscuring existing vulnerability and constraining more historical–structural adaptations.

A Mid North Coast, NSW, financial counsellor, who had been helping residents access financial assistance after disasters, captured a prevalent theme of high levels of trauma after repeated disasters:

We had the drought to start off with, then the fires, then the floods, which in some areas was a second flood but much more devastating than the first, and then, yeah, the trauma. It’s been trauma, upon trauma, upon trauma for the communities and there’s been a lot of mental health issues throughout the areas that have needed to be addressed.

Despite these observations resonating amongst certain social actors, many participants, including 12 directly affected by disasters, struggled to conceptualise their vulnerability. For example, four people affected by the 2019 Townsville flood (see Lloyd et al., 2020) remained incredibly nonchalant about future risks. I asked one what they would do when it floods next, and they replied, ‘I hope it is not in my lifetime’. They rebuilt to the same standards and were not considering any further adaptation. Relatedly, only around one-fifth of the participants considered the existential risks of climate change. Instead, losses to biodiversity and ecosystems were foregrounded, with participants implicitly or explicitly linking this to impacts on identity, sense of place and cultural heritage (Jackson, 2023a). Whilst a critical component of climate change loss and damage (Boyd et al., 2021), it indicates a widespread lack of awareness of the critical material risks that climate change poses to regional Australia.

Although some interest-based and ethnic communities have stronger ties, diverse social actors reported a breakdown of place-based communities and social cohesion, which significantly influences psychosocial vulnerability. A community resilience officer relayed, ‘in Cairns, as a community practitioner, this is just a headache for me. I’m like what community are you talking about?’ Although they suggested they had never observed a strong ‘place-based community’ culture in Cairns – apart from Traditional Owners – it had, nonetheless, become further fragmented in recent years, with COVID-19 highlighted as exacerbating this ongoing socio-cultural process. Almost everyone I spoke with – from government workers to disaster-affected people – perceived a decline in community cohesion and support.

An elderly couple in Atherton, QLD, provided a locally situated and deeper temporality of the ‘decline of rural Australia’ introduced early, linking it to the exodus of small-holder farming families after agricultural sector subsidies ended in the 1980s and markets were deregulated. The same couple also suggested that one of the main barriers to collective action is ‘The rugged individual, the capitalists’ narrative. You know as an individual we can solve anything we like on our own, we don’t need help from groups, and we don’t need help from anybody. All this sort of stuff’. Although the settler narrative of, as one participant said, ‘go at it alone’, is deeply historical and linked to identities, neoliberal governmentality has interacted with these pre-existing subjectivities and reinforced splintered Australian social relations in recent decades. However, Weller and O’Neil (2014) argue against such a black and white portrayal of neoliberalism ascendance in Australia. Indeed, instead of a stage-ist model, it is important to understand that colonial and racial orderings underpin market rule and social relations and have contributed to neoliberalism’s ascendance in Australia. For instance, although today, place-based communities will often come out and help with clean-ups or provide food in the initial aftermath of disasters, an NT humanitarian worker suggested this does not typically

translate into continued solidarity and intra and inter-community support. Indeed, the differential insurance cover and perceived response led to community tensions in the experience of financial counsellors after the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires.

Resilience discourses and interventions in regional Australia

I will now introduce key examples of resilience discourses and interventions to sketch the contours of climate resilience governmentality in regional Australia. I have chosen to emphasise several themes, which are as follows: resilience discourses and counter-discourses; resilience and devolution of responsibility; resilience as mental health; physicalist paradigm and competing priorities; neoliberal rationalities; and insurance-as-resilience. Although only a few examples, I want to convey a sense of the rationalities, calculations and logics of climate resilience governmentality.

Resilience discourses and counter-discourses

Regarding institutional conceptualisations, a resilience programme manager at the Queensland Reconstruction Authority (QRA) considered resilience as ‘understanding our risk, taking action, working together and learning’. This quote captures the widespread subjectivity of shared responsibility. A local council officer claimed resilience was ‘communities coming together, working together towards shared goals’. A financial counsellor suggested resilience ‘is not somebody sitting around waiting for someone else to rescue them... resilience is linked to self-determination’. One community development officer stated that resilience was ‘overcoming adversity’, which links to dispositional characteristics and personal coping mechanisms. An Agricultural Victoria (AgVic) stakeholder saw resilience building as a way ‘to empower [farming] communities to sell, prepare [for], and shape their own futures’. Business owners and their representatives typically saw resilience as a trait of all successful businesspeople, which linked to opportunities in crisis and the adaptability to exploit new markets. The director of the Townsville Chamber of Commerce responded to a question on building resilience to disasters, in reference to the 2019 Townsville floods, stating ‘you can’t mitigate all of life’s risks, there will always be risk in anything we do... resilience is making the most from uncertainty’.

These discourses, although diverse, strongly align with federal and state government participants who typically conceptualised resilience building as a shared responsibility between governments, industry and communities. A QLD state government informant representatively stated:

[P]eople say we’re going to go and make this community resilient. We can’t contribute to the resilience of that community, because to develop resilience everybody has got to be involved, all facets of government, private sector, the local community themselves and the individuals. Without all that working together there is no resilience.

Whilst individuals had internalised shared responsibility, resilience discourses that centred individual and collective capacities, without adequate reference to governmental responsibilities, are increasingly being contested by disaster affected people and other marginalised people (see also Beilin and Paschen, 2021). An AgVic stakeholder reflected:

When we went out there [East Gippsland, Victoria] to introduce the drought resilience plan, a lot of communities were quite assaulted by the word resilience. After they’ve lost their homes, their farms from the fire [2019/20 Black Summer fires], you know, following the four-year drought, they found the word resilience, like bounce back, was actually quite an insulting sort of word.

Indeed, East Gippsland farmers interviewed highlighted the lack of coherence of policies between levels of government and, despite recognising they were primarily responsible for risk reduction and managing climate impacts (i.e., resilience as a personal or household trait subjectivity), not enough support and guidance was being provided for adaptation nor emergency response (Jackson et al., 2023a). This discourse emerged amongst disaster-affected people in all states and territories.

Indigenous Yarrabah, QLD participants were highly critical of ‘resilience building’ interventions driven by local and state governments, which focused on individual and family responsibility such as financial counselling or family strategies to improve school attendance. During a meeting with eight Elders in a self-described Yarrabah ‘thinking group’ – composed of people representing different Peoples who shared an interest in the advancement of Indigenous self-determination – the issues of cashless welfare cards, ‘work for the dole’ programmes and mutual obligations were strong themes, despite the discussion being on climate change. The stated intention of such programmes is to discipline purchasing choices and inculcate work ethic in populations. These interventions are an example of disciplinary governmentality, one which a QLD state government contact said was needed to build ‘resilience in welfare dependent communities’. However, the Yarrabah thinking group said these programmes were having detrimental impacts on their communities, with people, for example, selling cashless cards for far lower amounts of cash, being unable to spend time on Country and build their own enterprises due to being ‘trapped in the welfare system’. The reduction of agency and self-determination in marginalised Indigenous communities through disciplinary means was emphasised as a key barrier to climate adaptation in interviews. The discourse of building resilience in Indigenous communities to climate change was a central theme in interviews with government actors, yet, in practice, policies were consistently undermining the capacities of Indigenous people.

At the National First Peoples Gathering on Climate Change (NFPGCC) in Cairns, March 2021, which I attended, scientific actors used resilience liberally and framed it as desirable traits of socio-ecological systems (e.g., persistence despite disturbance). Some scientifically trained Indigenous people used it in this way. More commonly, however, Indigenous people tended to frame resilience as resistance to historical and ongoing dispossession and epistemic erasure. At the NFPGCC, Bianca McNeair, a Malgana Traditional Owner, stated:

We are stronger together and our connection to Country is needed more now than ever in our lifetimes... We are thankful for our ancestors and our people’s resilience and provide a spirit that is still strong in our knowledge and our hearts. We can face a situation of doom and gloom and still bring strength to one another (Morgan-Bulled et al., 2021: 64).

From participant observations, I observed that when resilience interventions were framed as seeking to improve ecological systems, which are central to Indigenous identities and lifeworlds, or when used to articulate historical and ongoing resistance and collective action, there was less resistance to the term.

Resilience and devolution of responsibility

A regional NSW council officer stated:

Our Climate Resilience Strategy looks at the range of vulnerabilities that our community is exposed to as a shire... things like our energy security, our food security, the transport corridors through the Shire there, they’re important, as is community wellbeing and community connectivity in terms of,

you know, people's capacity to be able to respond to those shocks and stresses that occur that are outside of their control.

Although this quote captures several aspects of vulnerability, the participant acknowledged that the strategy is at an early stage and that concrete actions remain limited to risk assessments, minor physicalist interventions (e.g., road and bridge works) and community risk awareness. This was a common point from local government participants, whereby they would speak of the ambition and then bemoan the reality of funding cuts, lack of prioritisation compared to other responsibilities and the inability to shift perceptions at the governmental and community level. Resilience was typically pushed from the top, but a responsibility to implement was placed at the lower levels of government and then transferred to communities and ultimately individuals. Resilience-building policies driven by higher levels of government were often seen as additional burdens on local governments struggling to maintain existing services.

Resilience-as-mental health

A central theme reported by social services actors was that resilience-building programmes were increasingly focusing on improving mental health, which is a very real need across regional Australia. A state government actor from regional Victoria representatively explained that in response to the increasing impacts of disasters:

There's a mental health tool kit that got rolled out to all extension officers. It was also about people working with producers that got support... [a key part was asking] are you doing alright mate? There's a lot of programs that were based around that. There was a lot of extension put into resilience building and mental health.

A climate activist in QLD articulated a common critique of such programmes, stating, 'we are getting better at treating the symptoms but not the cause of mental ill health', which amongst their networks was eco-anxiety. More generally, economic insecurity and feelings of isolation were highlighted as causes of mental ill health by social workers across regional Australia, as highlighted in the previous section. There was significant state investment in mental health programmes in relation to disasters and climate change throughout regional Australia, primarily through the funding of NGOs. As part of the neoliberalisation of services, NGOs provide an increasing proportion of social services to the Australian public, and they must apply for grants that are based on government priorities, which are now increasingly focused on mental health and psychosocial support.

Physicalist paradigm and competing priorities

Despite the discourses linked to building community psychosocial resilience through various extension activities, when governments and non-governmental actors sought to build resilience at the local level, physicalist disaster management was centred. After interviews with local government and emergency services contacts, they often sent through their climate resilience strategies. These strategies illuminated such hazards as sea-level rise and the likely increasingly frequent and intense storms, flooding and drought, and detailed existing or potential adaptation options. Sea walls, improved drainage, early warning systems and land planning were centred. I asked a Cairns' government informant about the Cairns Council adaptation plan, and they responded:

It's a joke... it's mostly infrastructure kind of interventions, so don't build here, rebuild the sand dune here, consider a sea wall here, but what's actually going to happen if we get a cyclone or storm surge? It will go through areas where people are underinsured.

Furthermore, local governments' mandate to build resilience was said to be superseded by the desire for more revenue from having a larger population, more construction jobs and the chance to collect more rates. Amazingly, in QLD, for instance, real estate agents, banks and lawyers are not required to tell residents about the risks they face before purchasing or renting property. In Cairns, a disaster resilience office relayed:

People are often surprised, they'll come and talk to us at an event, a seniors' week, or a community day, and we show everyone how to look at property search tool. It's like oh you can look this up. And they'll say, oh I'm in a wildfire zone, I'm in a flood zone and nobody told me, and it's like yep, that's it. Nobody is legally obliged to tell you.

No matter how convincing local government's climate resilience plans are, when this regulatory and institutional landscape exists, they cannot convincingly argue they are building resilience.

Neoliberal rationalities and insurance-as-resilience

Almost all disaster-affected participants and social service providers perceived the insurance market failure as the biggest barrier to building resilience. From middle class to welfare-dependent subjects, significant sections of society struggle to pay ever-increasing insurance costs, and many properties are now uninsurable (ACCC, 2021). A senior consumer advocate wrote in correspondence: '87% of those insured in Lismore (NSW) do not have flood insurance due to cost. As you would agree, this is not underinsurance, this is market failure. And government intervention is needed'. Lismore flooded three times in early 2022 with devastating consequences and limited government response (ABC, 2022).

Recognising the growing problem of under-/un-insurability in northern Australia, the previous Liberal-National (Coalition) federal government proposed, with cross-bench support, a 10-billion-dollar reinsurance pool for insurance companies to prevent them from pulling out of the market due to the increasing frequency of climate hazards causing losses and damages (AusGov, 2021b). In addition to state-funded reinsurance being a form of corporate welfare, an expert expressed concerns over the ideological underpinnings of this scheme, stating:

I have a funny feeling that this reinsurance pool being from this particular federal government [Coalition] is going to be tied to resilience building. So, again, you're going to have to spend money to save money to make yourself less vulnerable. And when we are talking about the least able to be resilient that just hits them again.

Currently, one way to reduce premiums is to self-fund property works that reduce susceptibility to natural hazards. Yet, many need more capital to do this and therefore face the double burden of increased premiums and increasingly susceptible properties. This acts as a metaphor for climate resilience governmentality, whereby you must already have a baseline of security to be resilient.

Despite recognising the importance of insurance, a rural East Gippsland resident reflected on the climate-driven Black Summer bushfires that decimated their area: 'Some people have been resilient, some had insurance. So, here's another thing in the 60s, no insurance. No one had anything. Nowadays, people tend to rely on insurance'. The overreliance on insurance narrative, which was stronger at the local level, linked strongly to the discourses outlined in the psychosocial

vulnerability section. Many bemoaned the loss of resilience and spoke proudly of how people once ‘managed disasters without emergency services’. These subjectivities have a genesis pre-dating the neoliberal era. Yet they, like many national myths, are fuelled by modern discourses that idealise individual capabilities at the expense of collective action.

Climate resilience governmentality and the (re)production of vulnerable climate subjects

In addition to typical expressions of sovereign and disciplinary power, power circulates through overarching rationalities, modalities of knowing, institutions, technologies, procedures, reflections and calculations that guide the governing of territories and subjects (Foucault, 1982, 1991). Governmentality analyses help to expose these often-obscured dimensions of power in societies and how they shape and guide the behaviour of subjects and (re)produces their identities (Dean, 2009). I argue that in Australia there is an emerging climate resilience governmentality, one where the root causes of vulnerability are being obscured and resilience, although not a coherent concept or policy approach, is dominating discourses and interventions – climate and otherwise – at all scales. Here, I take steps towards understanding the influence of climate resilience governmentality on vulnerability to climate change in regional Australia. I do not suggest that resilience governmentality is causally increasing vulnerability, which I am unable to achieve here based on the methodology, but instead I show how it is working to reinforce rather than redress the root causes of vulnerability.

Critical scholars have demonstrated how governments attempt to condition subjects to (neo) liberal rationality through environmental governance (Agrawal, 2005; Fletcher, 2010, 2017). Resilience, as a bridging concept and ideological tool, plays a vital role in efforts to build individual and collective adaptive capacity to ‘unavoidable’ catastrophes, primarily through instilling subjectivities of personal, as opposed to state, responsibility (Chandler and Reid, 2016; Joseph, 2013, 2016). However, as O’Grady and Shaw (2023) demonstrated through the case of the UK’s COVID response, many governments are actively investing in and shaping the new institutional arrangements and devolved responsibilities of emergency response. In Australia, the increasing deferral of responsibility to lower levels of government and non-governmental actors, communities and individuals is occurring through primarily top-down prioritisation and the generation of discourses and modalities of knowing that percolate through society. Resilience interventions – as a technology of government – are framed as responsive to local concerns, such as the need for mental health services after major disasters that I previously highlighted. Whereas the issue of mental ill health is very real and growing, social services participants and disaster-affected communities highlighted that economic precarity, growing isolation and the breakdown of social solidarity, together with the loss of social services, were the primary cause of growing mental, and indeed physical, ill health. Climate-related disasters exacerbate these ongoing processes more than linear cause and effect (Oliver-Smith et al., 2017). If governors recognised these psychosocial determinants of vulnerability, building climate resilience would then entail improving the socio-economic conditions of rural and regional Australia through significant investment and programmes. Such interventions would endeavour to produce a sense of progress, meaning, solidarity and hope for Australians. Resilience discourses discursively draw from the, again, real need for self-determination and community-led action, but many residents were experiencing governmental neglect and social decline. The disconnect between discourses and lived experiences of regional Australians has resulted in growing counter-discourses against resilience-as-individual capacities. This reinforces Beilin and Paschen (2021) finding that regional Australians recognise a more central role of government in supporting communities to manage disasters. Governors, however, generally conceptualise this social decline as being due to dispositional factors more

than historical–structural processes, which captures the friction of climate resilience governmentality and subjects’ subjectivities and ideas of social contracts that developed over the twentieth century.

The discourse of shared responsibility for resilience between government, industry and communities was ubiquitous amongst governmental and non-governmental actors in regional Australia. Jackson et al. (2023b) suggested that East Gippsland, Victoria, farmers had internalised this shared responsibility narrative for managing climate change and disasters. The still widespread mythos of settlers being able to overcome adverse climatic conditions and other frontier mentalities, which are comfortable delusions considering the far greater support provided to regional Australians over the twentieth century, resilience – as everyone’s responsibility – downplays the hand of the state in shaping, supporting, and, for Indigenous people especially, harming regional Australians. The recognition of historical governmental policies that encouraged families to move to marginal lands to further develop the productive capacity of the land, which are now experiencing more regular climate extremes (e.g., droughts and floods), in addition to socio-economic decline, is a case in point. However, I observed a growing understanding within local government and throughout regional communities that they can no longer rely on significant emergency response and recovery. If the aim is to prepare the population for increasing disasters and less state capacity, then this strategy is slowly taking effect. There was very little confidence in the state to help communities prepare for and respond to disasters throughout regional Australia.

The focus on insurance-as-resilience, while not unique to Australia, is particularly pronounced in Australia. Federal governments have increasingly recognised the need for intervention in the reinsurance market, but those vulnerable due to historical–structural and intersectional vulnerabilities are primarily those who are already unable to access insurance due to the prohibitive costs, more so than lack of coverage. In a study on insurance in Cairns, QLD, Osbaldison et al. (2019) found that while many homeowners held insurance for flooding and storm damage, almost no renters did, and those that held insurance were typically underinsured. As introduced earlier, a senior Financial Counselling contact reported 87% of Lismore, NSW residents – a relatively deprived regional town, highly exposed to pluvial flooding – did not hold flood insurance, which is an extreme but not isolated example in Australia (ACCC, 2021). This same contact, and many others, equated insurance to resilience to climate change. However, historical–structural processes linked to the colonial period led to the development of settlements on coastal plains, along rivers and floodplains, which is a root cause of present-day vulnerability. The pressure to increase populations and hence ratepayers in increasingly cash-strapped regional cities, despite a legislated requirement of councils to reduce hazard risks, is leading to even further development of highly exposed land. The housing crisis, an omnipresent theme throughout this ethnography, is putting further pressure on governments to build as many houses as possible, with predictable consequences for climatic risk. Resilience-as-insurance does nothing to address the underlying vulnerability, and as climate-related hazards increase, even with government intervention in reinsurance markets, many people will remain un/underinsured. Insurance also encourages people to stay, just as discussions should be based on long-term planning to retreat from dangerous locations. Community groups and non-governmental actors consistently demanded better insurance coverage, so this was not just a governmental narrative. When I asked bushfire-affected residents whether they would leave their highly exposed properties after their experiences of major loss, few said they would be due to strong place attachment and a lack of capital to make the move. These are the questions that need to be addressed through government, but they remain obscured, and the rationalities and calculations of climate resilience governmentality are implicated.

Climate resilience governmentality is not applied blanketly, and other overlapping governmentality surface when applying intersectional analysis. Indigenous and other social groups perceived to be problems (i.e., disposition and behavioural traits) are governed through disciplinary measures,

such as previously introduced welfare measures, which informs how resilience interventions are designed in such communities. Conversely, dominant groups in regional Australia are seen to just need better mental health programmes and interventions to ensure they can continue to access market insurance, for example. The history of state-backed dispossession, forced relocation and the exclusion from social, economic, incarceration and political life that characterises Indigenous experiences of colonialisation (Celermajer et al., 2021; Crook and Short, 2019; Nethery, 2021; Watego, 2021) continues through government resilience building interventions in Indigenous communities. Governmental and non-governmental actors spoke of the need to prioritise building resilience in Indigenous communities and even provide examples of physicalist adaptations (e.g., sea walls, dune improvement) and community capacity building (e.g., improving school attendance, risk awareness programmes). However, Indigenous participants highlighted the everyday violence of child removal, incarceration and being ‘trapped in the welfare system’. Resilience for many Indigenous peoples meant their historical and ongoing resistance to colonial oppression and their ability to pursue their own interpretation of self-determination, which includes demands of reparation and governmental support. This starkly contrasts the currently prevailing climate resilience governmentality that articulates personal and shared responsibility, neoliberal logics and calculations and dispositional characteristics of adaptability and flexibility. Even using these logics demonstrates that Indigenous Australians are by far the most resilient social groups in Australia, having survived and retained their unique lifeworlds despite the omniscient violence inflicted on their sovereign territories (Country et al., 2019; Crook and Short, 2019; Lyons et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020).

Finally, underpinning climate resilience governmentality in Australia is far deeper economic rationalities. Representative of federal and state governments, the Queensland Climate Adaptation Strategy (QLDGov, 2017: 6) states, ‘Climate change is an amplifier of existing climate variation and will affect Queensland’s diverse communities, regions and industries in different ways, presenting both opportunities and risks’. Opportunities appearing first is no accident, and this is being interpreted by lower-level actors as being primarily economic in nature. A self-declared progressive social service provider in Darwin, NT said, ‘the climate transition work we have been doing was focusing on economic opportunities’. All the resilience strategies I read – from local to national levels – illuminated building economic resilience. Many groups have historically been excluded – by way of geography, race, class and gender – from the economic growth and material improvements of Australian society. Most subjects, even those highly vulnerable, had deeply internalised resilience as individual or household trait subjectivity and social services contacts reported that people perceived it was their fault instead of ‘structural feature of the system’ (i.e., colonial capitalism). Rural communities were trying to revive their high streets or collectively act to reduce their climate vulnerability with minimal assistance apart from small competitive grants that civil society groups must fight over. One interviewee drew attention to the bushfire recovery grants in East Gippsland targeting businesses even if they were not directly affected by the Black Summer bushfires. This, amongst other support which targeted tourism businesses, instead of farmers and other residents, caused frustration amongst disaster-affected participants. However, these kinds of resilience-building measures make sense when viewed through underlying neoliberal rationalities. It is conditioning people to climate resilience governmentality and creating resilient and unresilient subjects in the eyes of governors.

Conclusion

Although climate change is already causing significant losses and damages in Australia (Ash et al., 2023; Lawrence et al., 2022), it will only get more severe over time unless the root causes of vulnerability are systematically addressed. Even for wealthy countries such as Australia, there are no

easy fixes. Indeed, to address the historical–structural, intersectional and psychosocial determinants of vulnerability, massive government investment, critical societal reflection and truth-telling is needed (see Morrison et al., 2022). The intersection of geography, class, race and gender is creating spaces of extreme vulnerability in regional Australia. While vulnerability is acknowledged in governmental discourses, resilience building is centred in Australian climate change policy at all scales. Resilience can be considered a form of governmentality, with certain rationalities, calculations and reflections that align with those who hold political and economic power. In this ethnography, I asked the question, do resilience discourses and interventions influence vulnerability to climate change in regional Australia? I argued that resilience discourses and interventions do not address the historical structural, intersectional and psychosocial determinants of vulnerability. The many root causes of vulnerability in regional Australia (e.g., highly exposed fixed infrastructure, structural racism, increasing inequality, breakdown of communities and social solidarity) are being obscured. Instead, climate resilience governmentality seeks to create and reproduce subjects who internalise the discourse of resilience as a household or individual trait – although framed as shared responsibility by governors, with adaptive capacity being more about autonomous actions such as insurance, risk awareness and other agential factors. Different groups throughout regional Australia are governed through different mechanisms, with Indigenous peoples experiencing disciplinary interventions, while other dominant groups, who were often still experiencing neglect and social decline, are considered to just need a helping hand through mental health programmes, physicalist adaptations or ensuring the stability of reinsurance markets. This process is not a withdrawal of the state, like some neoliberal governmentality literature suggests, but instead a top-down driven process based on government prioritisation and the building of non-governmental institutional landscapes for the provision of services. Instead of building resilient subjects, I argue that climate resilience governmentality is contributing to the colonial and racialised undermining of individual and collective capacities despite discourses of building societal resilience. Resilience discourses of supporting regional Australians and shallow interventions that obscure growing vulnerability are a form of governmental gaslighting, which denies the lived experience of precarity and insecurity. In a climate-changed world, further climate governmentality analyses are needed to hold governments accountable and to identify points of entry for effective vulnerability reduction.

Highlights

- Despite material affluence, Australia's vulnerability to climate change is increasing.
- I identify the contours of an emerging climate resilience governmentality.
- This governmentality illuminates shared responsibility, subjects' psychological dispositions and other neoliberal rationalities.
- The historical–structural, intersectional and psychosocial determinants of vulnerability are being obscured and reinforced.
- Climate resilience governmentality is reinforcing vulnerability by undermining individual and collective capacities.

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Notes

1. Australia and New Zealand.
2. The Australian government designates all settlements outside of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane regional Australia.

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