Slow Burn: Time and Waiting in Karachi's Relentless Summer

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'In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?

– Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* [1]

Introduction: Heat, Time and Climate Change

Climate change is often presented as an abstract phenomenon that is spatially and temporally distant from our daily lives. Mainstream discourse on climate change frames it as an apocalyptic ticking clock, where time will run out and catastrophe will be upon us.[2] When we talk about climate change, we conceive it as either distant and something to worry about in the long run (rising sea levels, increasing global temperatures) or immediate and catastrophic (floods, melting glaciers, and extreme heatwaves). This binary thinking limits the space for meaningful climate action, as it frames the issue either as something far off and out of reach, or as an overwhelming crisis we are powerless to address. In reducing climate change to these extremes, we fail to recognise the gradual, ongoing transformations of the climate that require us to adapt in ways that prevent disaster while still acting with urgency. Expanding our perspective allows for more proactive, nuanced responses that recognise the continuous nature of climate change and its present-day impacts.

Time, body, and space are three interconnected variables through which one may understand the changing climate: The body interacts with the space it inhabits, is shaped by it over time, but also simultaneously remakes the space. In essence, the body and the climate together are

changed, in time. An ethos for understanding climate change rooted in time would enable us to conceptualise it as a reality deeply embedded in the fabric of our daily lives. Thus, the focus of climate response and action would shift away from large-scale interventions that have so far been mostly ineffective such as the Heatwave Management Plan of Karachi,[3] which borrowed its framework heavily from other geographic regions and failed to account for certain context-specific attributes of Karachi's urban heat. It prioritised circulating flyers and text messages containing heat advisories as well as specific instructions such as staying indoors (which would be even more harmful than being outside for those who live in houses made from heat trapping materials). These interventions are far removed from the ground reality[4] and are therefore ineffective in changing the impact of heat for those vulnerable to it because it does not consider how heat impacts people over time and in their day-to-day lives.

Karachi's Heatscape

People in South Asia have adapted to heat for centuries, but the extent and intensity of this heat is now changing significantly.[5] Cities are the largest contributors to rising temperatures, driven by their central role in capitalist production. Built structures and heat-trapping surfaces in urban areas make local climates warmer.¶ Karachi is one such city, declared one of the region's 'hotspots'[♯] for climate change,[7] where rising temperatures have begun to manifest in the form of frequent heatwaves and extreme heat in the summer months leading to a significant number of casualties.

Karachi's heatwaves are a direct and immediate manifestation of climate change. The trouble with presenting highly visible manifestations of climate change like heatwaves is that they do not paint the full picture of its impacts. They are newsworthy because they are event-focused, body-bound, and time-bound.[8] In the media, the impacts of heat and heatwaves in Karachi are most often represented through severe illness, death, and infrastructural and economic harm, which simplifies climate change to death and catastrophe. This is reductive because, while heatwaves highlight the global climate crisis, the true effects of climate change in Karachi are seen in the quiet, everyday ways that heat affects its citizens, which is more difficult to represent. From the energy it takes to get through a sweltering workday to the toll on physical health, mental well-being, and productivity, the oppressive heat shapes how people move, work, and rest. It alters how we relate to time, slowing down our bodies and our days, and yet we are forced to keep going. By focusing on these daily struggles, we can better understand how heat is part of everyday life in Karachi, affecting its inhabitants in ways that may not always be catastrophic but are unrelenting. The extent of these impacts remains mostly invisible because they are temporally dispersed, since the damage accumulates slowly over time, making it harder to recognise as a crisis.

This is what Rob Nixon refers to as 'slow violence,' in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of The Poor*. Violence is usually conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into sensational visibility. Slow violence, however, is a violence of delayed destruction,' which is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but rather incremental and accretive, with calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.[9] In this way, we can think of heat in Karachi as a slow violence that wears people down through chronic exposure to high temperatures, often leading to long-term health issues, productivity losses, and psychological strain. This essay aims to grapple with the representational and narrative challenges posed by the relative invisibility of heat as a form of slow violence by zooming into these struggles and narrating them through the lens of the most vulnerable. This will also unearth how it alters the experience of heat through time.

One way to think about Karachi's urban landscape of intense heat is to consider it as a heatscape, encapsulating various factors like climate change, exclusionary infrastructures, and the systemic inequalities of urban living that make poor people especially vulnerable to the violent heat. The rising population density, industrial activities that contribute to heat pollution, and the heat-retaining properties of concrete buildings and asphalt roads all exacerbate the urban heat island (UHI) effect. As a coastal city, Karachi's heat is further intensified by extremely high levels of humidity. With 62 % of its population living in informal settlements,[10] overcrowding, limited access to cooling resources, frequent load shedding, and inadequate infrastructure make daily life under extreme heat increasingly difficult. Access to electricity-powered cooling devices, such as air conditioning and fans, becomes crucial for survival in this heatscape. However, electricity supply is sporadic in many low-income areas of Karachi, and cooling systems remain inaccessible for much of the population that also lacks financial means to offset extreme temperatures. This infrastructural violence highlights the stark class divide in the city's ability to cope with heat.

¶ According to the IUCN, cities are responsible for approximately 75% of greenhouse as emissions and up to 80% of global energy consumption.[6]

♯ A hotspot is a location where higher temperatures cause significant reduction in living standards.

As a researcher on climate and energy justice in Karachi,¶ I have learned the importance of listening and learning from those who are most vulnerable. I draw on my work in the low-income areas of Lyari and Korangi, where the experience of heat is not just a daily discomfort but an ongoing challenge to survival. According to a study by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, there are six 'poverty clusters' in Karachi where 90% of the very poor households are geographically concentrated, and these include both Lyari and Korangi.[11] The term 'poverty clusters' helps in highlighting the extremely uneven way in which poverty, space, and subsequent exposure to heat are divided in the city. Lyari, located in the southern district of Karachi, is the smallest but most densely populated town in the city, with 158,313 people per square kilometer and an overall population of almost one million people as of 2023.[12] Korangi is a major industrial area in Karachi and employs 1.5 million workers in various industries (textile, leather, chemicals). Many of these workers are migrants from other parts of the province such as Badin and Tharparkar. It too has a high population of 1.3 million residents with 23,118 people per square kilometer.[13] By focusing on communities living in these areas, we can gain a clearer understanding of how the physical, mental, and social effects of heat are unevenly distributed across the city and how this impacts people's experiences of time differently.

A State of Slowness

I conducted fieldwork in 8 Chowk, Dhobi Ghat, a neighbourhood in Lyari, during the peak of the city's harsh summer in July 2024. Upon my arrival, I found a group of women sitting outside their homes with their children, fanning themselves as they waited for scheduled electricity load-shedding to end. They explained that power outages often last up to 12 hours a day, leaving them with no relief from the stifling heat. The infrastructure in this area is a significant contributor to their suffering. The homes are built in close proximity—often just 1 to 1.5 feet apart—that blocks natural airflow and exacerbates the heat. These houses are constructed with heat-retaining materials like concrete and cement, making the spaces unbearably hot especially when there is load shedding. Many residents add extra floors to accommodate growing families, which further obstructs ventilation. According to local building and town regulations, the amount of space between walk-up buildings (ground plus four) should be at least 30 feet. These standards are mostly enforced in planned residential areas, but unplanned areas are not protected by these regulations. During load-shedding, the lack of electricity means the homes grow so dark that it is hard to tell if it is day or night, as the buildings have been constructed so close together that they block sunlight from the windows and leave no room for proper ventilation. The combination of poor infrastructure, unreliable electricity, and heat-trapping materials creates an environment where extreme heat becomes even more unbearable, contributing to Karachi's dangerous heatscape.

For those living in constant heat without access to cooling, the day feels endless, and each hour passes more slowly as fatigued bodies struggle to cope. This slowing down of both the body and mind traps people in a cycle of exhaustion that makes it harder to get through each day. This slowness is not merely discomfort; it is a structural reality that deepens the divide between the privileged and the marginalised, shaping how time is experienced across class lines. Venus James,¶ an elderly Christian woman living in Korangi who suffers from a heart condition, said with frustration and grief in her voice, 'When it is very hot and we have no electricity, my health suffers greatly. Blood pressure increases and something happens to me—I feel faint. I know so many people who have collapsed and have had to be taken to the hospital. Those who are weak, sick and old also fall ill very often and many people have lost their lives to the heat. It is a great struggle.'

As temperatures rise, the physical toll of the heat reduces mobility and productivity, creating lethargy that slows down daily activities. Research shows that there are limits to how much heat the body can endure. When outside temperatures exceed 40°C, the body has to increase its metabolism and heart rate, exerting more energy to maintain its ideal core temperature. Under higher temperatures, the body loses its essential minerals and electrolytes and as it works to cool itself, the energy deficit impacts overall physical functioning. Basic tasks that would normally require minimal effort become exhausting under extreme heat. The energy spent on maintaining a stable core temperature depletes the body's resources, leaving little energy for work. Over time, this creates a cycle of fatigue, where each day's demands are met with less physical capacity, further entrenching individuals in a state of forced slowness. Chronic exposure to these cycles can cause heat stress and, in extreme cases, heat stroke.[14]

For many workers, particularly those on night shifts, power outages worsen this condition. Many low-income areas, like those in Korangi, face frequent load-shedding. Peer Buksh, a

¶This essay is informed and shaped by research conducted with The Knowledge Forum, especially their forthcoming video series on K-Electric called *Left in the Dark*.[12]

¶All names used in this essay are real and have been used after obtaining the consent of the participants.[16]

Muslim man in his early thirties is a machine operator in a denim factory. He told me that it is quite common for labourers to take on night shifts which usually end around 8am. Often when they reach home in the morning, there is no electricity, so they are unable to sleep. He explained, 'It can be dangerous to factory workers who work with machinery, and there have been many instances where workers have dozed off while working and had accidents and gotten hurt because of the machinery.' It takes more energy to stay awake and get the same amount of work done. Their income suffers greatly because they work on a per-piece basis, and they have to push their bodies harder to achieve the same output within the same time in sweltering heat. Buksh added, 'Workers have often fainted and had to be taken to the hospital because of heat stress.'

In Karachi, the experience of time during extreme heat in lower income households is greatly influenced by the city's unreliable electricity supply. This is called load-shedding, and it involves planned power outages that force residents into periods of involuntary slowness by disrupting their daily routines and activities. This is especially a persistent occurrence in low-income areas, where the intermittent loss of power results in a chaotic and fragmented experience of time. In an urbanised city like Karachi, where technology is deeply embedded in everyday life, the absence of electricity can be disruptive to day-to-day functioning. The absence of electricity also means that essential appliances like refrigerators and fans cannot be used, so basic activities such as cooking and cleaning become more labor-intensive and time-consuming. This technological deprivation adds to the physical and mental strain of heat and necessitates extra effort for completing routine tasks. For those in poverty, time is a precious but dwindling resource. Lakshmi Devi, a middle-aged Hindu woman and a home-based worker, supports her family by shelling walnuts. The income she earns from a single bag of walnuts is crucial—it can make the difference between her two young children having a meal or going to bed hungry. The heat slows down her pace of work, and she sometimes has to resort to charity meals to ensure that at least her children are fed. 'I have to leave my work to cook before the electricity goes out again,' she said.

During my visit to Lyari, I met Najma Maheshwari, a middle-aged woman from the Hindu community who wants to open a community centre in Lyari to educate the residents of the area. She too, like many other women in the area, engages in home-based work. She shared with me how living with unreliable electricity affects her and her family. The night before, she explained, she could hardly sleep as the electricity was out for most of the night. As her four children aged between 4 and 16 years struggled with the heat, she had to fan them by hand herself, a physically exhausting task that left her weary and spent. When the power finally restored, Najma barely got a couple of hours of rest before it went out again.

When there is no electricity, her home is in near-total darkness even during the day. Her family only eats once a day, timing their meals during the brief periods when electricity is available. She cannot store food in the refrigerator since frequent power cuts cause it to spoil. 'It feels like our entire system is disturbed because there's no electricity from morning to night,' she lamented. She tries to fit her entire day's activities into the few hours that there is electricity: cooking, helping her children with homework, cleaning, resting and working. Najma and many others in her community rely on home-based work, such as making gajras or shelling walnuts and pistachios, to earn a living. Without electricity, they must slog on even as they are drenched in sweat, as they cannot afford to stop working and their productivity is severely compromised.

In Karachi, the privileged enjoy a comfortable insulation from the city's heatscape because they have access to technological cooling infrastructures such as air conditioners, roof heat-proofing technologies, and solar-powered coolers which offer a means of protection from the effects of the intense heat in the city, a way in which heat is kept out so that their life can continue as normal undisturbed by the city's climate realities. The working classes, however, must work harder and longer hours to compensate for their reduced efficiency caused by heat-related health issues. The smooth operation of Karachi's urban life relies on the unseen and often unacknowledged struggles of its workers, whose efforts and sacrifices are critical in upholding the city's high-speed production and consumption cycles. The working classes uphold the infrastructure of speedy living while simultaneously being cast outside it.[15]

Conclusion: A Temporality of Waiting

The relentless summer heat pushes low-income communities into a prolonged, almost immobilising state of waiting without being able to alleviate their suffering in any meaningful way. The daily challenges they face—from managing exhaustion to coping with the toll on their physical and mental health—affect every aspect of their lives, limiting their ability to work, care for family, or even rest. Their days are spent enduring the effects of extreme temperatures, with the hope for relief constantly deferred.

This temporality of waiting becomes a defining feature of their reality, with each hour bringing new hardships and each day marked by an anxious anticipation of relief. Waiting for electricity, for evening breezes, for water and food, for a day without load-shedding, they live in a present

that is defined by a yearning for a future they cannot shape. This enforced waiting places them in a state where they simply endure, day by day, the adverse conditions that can stretch on indefinitely. They exist within a seemingly endless loop of suffering and hope, forced to wait for change that remains painfully out of reach.

Najma talked about this temporality of waiting: 'It's like deceiving yourself. There is electricity, there is a little bit of air [from the fans]. Then the electricity is gone, so we will feel hot. We are waiting, we tell ourselves that our bodies can handle the heat for ten minutes, fifteen minutes, we keep telling ourselves this until the electricity comes and we have some relief. But this is an endless cycle. Even when there is electricity, we are preparing ourselves mentally for it to go again. We are so used to this, we have no choice but to adjust, to fool ourselves. It kind of makes us feel far removed from our own lives, like we are waiting for a future of peace and comfort that never arrives.'

The unequal distribution of heat in Karachi vividly highlights a climate justice issue that significantly magnifies the vulnerability of already marginalised populations. The relentless heat disproportionately affects those who are least equipped to cope, further entrenching social and economic disparities. In meeting the bare necessities of the present effectively, these communities are trapped in a state of forced resilience where they have little choice but to persevere despite overwhelming challenges.

Notes

1. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2013.
2. Whyte "Time as Kinship." https://ssrn.com/abstract=3830025.
3. Karachi Heatwave Management Plan, 10–12
4. Abdullah and Macktoom, "Heat (In)action."
5. Anwar, "Everyday Politics of Thermal Violence."
6. IUCN, "Cities and Nature."
7. Abdullah and Macktoom, "Heat (In)action."
8. Nixon *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2.
9. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2.
10. Hassan, *The Changing Nature of informal Settlements*, 91.
11. Bengali, et al., "Poverty in Karachi," 159–178.
12. City Population, "Lyari (Karachi)."
13. City Population, "Korange (Karachi)."
14. Lennon, "How Hot is Too Hot for the Human Body?"
15. Sharma, "Tempoal Labour and the Taxicab," 57.

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