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Twenty-First Century

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# Introduction

Critical Environmental Justice Studies in  
the Twenty-First Century

JANET FISKIO AND JULIA CHRISTENSEN

For the inaugural issue of *Resilience*, we chose to organize our book review around two landmark texts in environmental justice studies: Joni Adamson's *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism* and David Naguib Pellow's *Garbage Wars*. *Resilience's* web format reflects the ways the online environment alters research and communication for all of us, and so our first book review section reflects new possibilities for discourse through a Skype discussion (what is more online—at the moment, anyway—than Skype?). The forums presented here offered scholars a chance to respond to and learn from each other, live, in real time. This forward-looking format is one way to expand the potential of the book review. Meanwhile, the books that we have chosen at this time allow for retrospective engagement with some of the field's most monumental texts.

For these forums, we invited scholars whose interdisciplinary work crosses American, Caribbean, and environmental studies, history, literature, political ecology, and sociology. In part 1, "Environmental Justice, the Transcorporeal, and Engaged Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century," Shazia Rahman, Karen Salt, and Julie Sze engage in a wide-ranging dialogue starting from a series of questions, including these: What do you see as the most compelling questions we need to be thinking about today in terms of environmental justice? What insights do these two texts offer to thinking through human corporeality and our imbrication in the nonhuman world? What is your vision for engaged scholarship in the environmental humanities? Rahman,

Salt, and Sze articulate the significance of writing and methodology in crossing both disciplinary and academic/activist divides. Their conversation highlights the intertwined processes of transcorporeality and de-territorialization in a landscape of “resurgent imperialism.”<sup>1</sup>

In part 2, “Engaged Scholarship in a Vernacular Landscape,” scholars Joni Adamson and David Pellow reflect on the vital place of labor in environmental justice studies and the challenge that intersectional analysis continues to pose to romantic forms of environmentalism. In considering the trajectory of EJ studies and the influence of their personal histories, Adamson and Pellow model Maria Cotera’s call for public humanities to “work to heal the split between the places where I first developed the desire to know and the places that shaped that desire into authorized ways of knowing.”<sup>2</sup>

Karen Salt’s review essay “Startling Feeling: Environmental Justice Scholarship Amidst the Roots of Imperialism” links Adamson and Pellow’s texts to emerging modes of scholarship in environmental justice studies, focusing in particular on postcolonial landscapes. Drawing on studies of American empire from multiple disciplinary positions—sociology, American studies, literature, anthropology—Salt articulates a central demand and desire of the current moment: to uncover the roots of contemporary imperialisms in order to assemble environmental scholarship that is “something tangible, vibrant, and engaged with the world.”

The following text box suggests current installations (broadly defined as art projects, in the most interdisciplinary sense) that engage the ideas brought forth by *Garbage Wars* and *American Indian Literature*. Sarah Kanouse, Design 99, and Simparch all construct projects that merge design, sustainability, community, politics, and landscape in poignant and contemporary ways. The web is built on hyperlinks, and our goal is that as you read the forum, you will click on these projects, which will surely lead you onto unknown trajectories. Hopefully this nonlinear trail of ideas will lead you to new engagements with environmental justice, trash, and cultural production.

## Sidebar

SARAH KANOUSE

Sarah Kanouse is an interdisciplinary artist and researcher, who holds the position of assistant professor of intermedia, School of Art and Art History, at

the University of Iowa. Her work focuses on the politics of landscape through video, installation, photography, radical fieldwork, and writing. More information about Sarah Kanouse can be found at her website, <http://readysubjects.org>.

#### NATIVE RESURGENCE

From the website of Sarah Kanouse: “Native Resurgence is a map and primer to sites of Native American resistance and ingenuity in the upper Midwest since the 1970s. Our goals are threefold. First, we want to place Native stories firmly in the center of our narrative; they too often occupy a position peripheral to the concerns of urban progressives and radicals. Second, we want to highlight successful examples of recent Native activism and tribal development, since stories of all-too-real victimization and discrimination tend to be the ones that most readily spring to the minds of politically conscious non-Natives. Finally, we hope that focusing on Midwestern Native politics might productively unsettle familiar narratives of Chicago’s urban processes, placing them in relation to a longer history of colonialism and dispossession, but also endurance and evolution.” For more information see Sarah Knouse’s website at <http://readysubjects.org/portfolio/?p=751>.

#### DESIGN 99

Design 99 is a duo made up of Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope, based in Detroit, Michigan. Their projects investigate new models of contemporary art and architectural practice. Initially occupying a retail storefront space, the design studio situated itself in the public realm offering over-the-counter design consultations and marketed \$99 house call specials. Now embedded in their residential corner of Detroit, Design 99 seeks out opportunities to experiment with art and design within their community. More about Design 99’s projects can be found at the Design 99 website, <http://www.visitdesign99.com>.

#### GARBAGE TOTEMS

*Garbage Totems* is a project by Design 99 in which they are scavenging material in their Detroit neighborhood to build “totems,” which will manifest as sculptural, functional constructions. Their neighborhood includes many vacated homes; leaving behind abandoned houses and garages; and a plethora of discarded mattresses, tires, toys, and furniture. The idea of the totem is often meant to ward off an unwanted spirit, or to protect the community in which it is displayed. In this case, by using discarded trash covering their street to build functional sculpture, Design 99 is creating a generative, creative space out of the detritus of Detroit’s boom and bust—perhaps protecting their neighborhood from continuing loss. For a video about their *Garbage Totem #1*, see <https://vimeo.com/33641761>. For an interview with Gina Reichert

from Design 99, in which she describes the skate/sculpture park they've built as a part of the project, see: <http://hyperallergic.com/89448/a-skate-park-as-neighborhoodstabilization-in-detroit>.

#### SIMPARCH

SIMPARCH is an American artist collective that was founded in Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 1996. Their practice involves large-scale, usually interactive installations and works that, as the group's name suggests, examine simple architecture, building practices, site specificity, and materials that may be salvaged, recycled, or generally brought together with a kind of DIY attitude. Often collaborating with other artists, builders, art critics, graffiti artists, filmmakers, and skateboarders, and musicians, Simparch works at providing sites that allow for social interaction and experimentation with design and materials. More information about Simparch can be found on the Simparch website, <http://www.simparch.org>.

#### CLEAN LIVIN'

Clean Livin' is an autonomous living system built by Simparch in Wendover, Utah, at the Center for Land Use Interpretation's residency site. The location of the site is on the border of Utah and Nevada, on a vacated Air Force base, and Clean Livin' is built in an area known as South Base. South Base is "off the grid," with no running water or electricity. Given South Base's location, Simparch saw an opportunity to create a structure in which a researcher can live and work, engaging notions of sustainability, industrial military legacy, and myths of the frontier. They built a World War II-era Quonset hut that has solar power, an internal water supply, and on-site waste treatment. To read about the Simparch installation at South Base on the Center for Land Use Interpretation's website, see <http://www.clui.org/section/cluisimparch-living-systems-research-facility-southbase>. A video of Simparch at the Clean Livin' installation is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjsS6CTeiN4>.

#### NOTES

1. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 37.
2. Cotera, "Reimagining the Meanings of Service on the Streets of Detroit," 33.

#### WORKS CITED

- Cotera, Maria. "Reimagining the Meanings of Service on the Streets of Detroit." *Academe* 98, no. 6 (November–December 2012): 28–33. <http://www.aaup.org/article/reimagining-meanings-service-streets-detroit#.UdJg2xYd5ko>.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.