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# A Conversation with Shazia Rahman, Karen Salt, and Julie Sze

JANET FISKIO

JANET FISKIO (JF): Would you each like to talk a bit about what you see as the significance of *Garbage Wars* and *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism*?

JULIE SZE (JS): *Garbage Wars* was the first book to model a type of interdisciplinary approach to environmental justice social movements that was very compelling to me. At that point when it was published, most of the work was from quantitative sociology, so reading Pellow's approach was very refreshing. It was recognizably sociological, but it was also informed by history and by critical ethnic studies approaches. His articulation of an "environmental justice framework" was also useful. It focused on processes and power in a way that was expansive and could be applied to many different cases. So while grounded in a particular case, place, and time, *Garbage Wars* was broader than a single-study approach.

KAREN SALT (KS): *American Indian Literature* (AIL) reminded me about the transformative power of scholarship. I don't mean the ways in which critics turn toward new methodologies or utilize an ever-expanded toolkit to deal with and work through problems. While these are transformations—of a sort—the ones that move me imagine a new way of engaging and being in the world. Adamson's book took me on a

walkabout. I felt the land and I listened to the people as they witnessed their lives to her. She transformed their living into a narrative journey of change, choice, and challenge. And most fearlessly she placed herself in the midst of this—not a chronicler of some great natural past, but as a member of the common, an equal. I remain determined to be that same kind of fearless engager within my work.

SHAZIA RAHMAN (SR): Both *Garbage Wars* and *AIL* point to the urban and the rural in terms of issues of environmental justice. I think crossing that divide was very important for ethnic studies in the US. And *AIL*, in particular, was important because it is a model to me for how books should be written. Engaged scholarship should connect personal experiences to literary texts. And Adamson writes beautifully. Her scholarship is also a story just like the stories she writes about. Engaged scholarship should tell a story because stories and narratives are what move people.

JS: As someone who was initially from literary studies, like Shazia, I deeply appreciate scholars like Adamson and Pellow who can cross not only disciplinary divides, but the academic/activism divide, as Shazia notes.

KS: I think that's what I enjoyed the most about *Garbage Wars*. As a person interested in the *longue durée* of environmental injustices, I embraced Pellow's book. Although it was still sociological in approach, like Julie I sensed in it a keen interest in telling a story about the cycles of innovation, inequities, and the redistribution of garbage into far less protected areas. It also provided compelling evidence that suggested that the fight for environmental justice does not set up a clear victim and victimizer. Embracing that type of simplistic dichotomy ensures that internal forces and their weaponry in these garbage wars will be ignored. Pellow took the time to describe the situation and chart the choices confronting communities before arguing for a way out of the cycle. To me, this is what environmental justice has to do. It has to confront these legacies—head on—in order to stop what are often cycles of injustice.

JF: Can you say more about why the crossover with critical ethnic studies is crucial for interdisciplinary environmental/EJ work?

SR: I mentioned critical ethnic studies as important but I'd also like to see more crossovers within a more global arena. We need to remember our colonial and imperial histories internationally as well.

JS: There is an odd field gap between critical ethnic studies and environmental justice research—where Pellow and Adamson are among the few scholars that bridge that gap. Critical ethnic studies, and environmental justice scholarship, to me, are fields that are deeply concerned with praxis and addressing social and environmental inequalities. That also overlaps with environmental humanities. One concrete example related to Shazia's point is global climate justice.

SR: Absolutely, sub-Saharan Africa feels it more than we do.

JS: Yes, those with the least culpability face the greatest consequences.

KS: I agree with Shazia and Julie. More needs to be done on this. It is essential that we begin to tease apart the ways in which difference is often encoded within environmental injustices. Tracing these codes will allow us—as students, critics, and beings in the world—to better understand how these codes build upon and refract each other.

## Toxics

JF: Lawrence Buell described the pervasiveness of “toxic discourse” in his 1998 essay in *Critical Inquiry*. More recently, Stacy Alaimo argues for a trans-corporeal understanding of the “unpredictable and unwanted actions” of various bodily agents.<sup>1</sup> What insights do these two texts offer to thinking through human corporeality and our imbrication in the nonhuman world? How does EJ theory and practice reveal these complex networks?

SR: Adamson points out that landscape is more than wilderness and nature. She wants us to see it as contested terrain where the marginalized contest and organize around social and environmental problems. This focus and emphasis on contestation, to me, was crucial. Buell also talks about contestation when he says that toxic discourse is more a discourse of allegation because the authorities are still not satisfied and this links well with all the ways in which Rob Nixon says we have to try to convince people with shorter attention spans about the “slow violence” of toxicity.<sup>2</sup>

KS: I agree with Shazia's points and would add that I think the issue with corporeality hinges on our willingness to comprehend the many ways that certain subsets of humans have been de-corporealized. Critics have to tread carefully through these issues in order to comprehend the ways that de-corporealized people have been de-territorialized from their own communities. History gives us an array of military and resource grabs all in the name of the land being empty—or to use more contemporary language—underdeveloped by a group of people conveniently imagined as separate from, or incapable of managing, the environment.

JS: To me, this point connects back to the question of culpability and consequences. The fact of disproportionate exposure is a product of deep racial and colonial history, and the idea of communities of color and first nations as canaries in the mine is important. So, as more privileged people in the Global North worry about toxicity, and their trans-corporeality (to paraphrase Buell and Alaimo), it's important to use the examples where this hyper-pollution has been contested for much longer as the guide to action—so avoiding individualistic and consumerist answers in favor of structural and political ones.

JF: Julie, can you say more about the way that concerns about toxicity can reveal a certain level of privilege—and/or how we need to think about this in a more collective/EJ framework?

JS: This idea goes back to the idea of Ulrich Beck's "Risk Society." It's very interesting to see that more people care about toxicity in the last ten years, but the question is how this translates into policy and practice. Sociologist Andy Szasz talks about the inverted quarantine, and the turn to bottled water and organic food, instead of focusing on regulation. Class shapes these discussions, but they are also not just related to class. Elites can buy these things, but at the end of the day, these risks are not individualized. The issue of temporality is interesting. If you are born with two hundred industrial chemicals already, it's not that helpful to think about individual risk.

SR: I completely agree that these risks are not individualized. We have to think in terms of changing and transforming structures and institutions rather than thinking that one individual's shopping habits alone can make a difference. Thinking that "I'm going to shop local and organic and save the world" is simply not enough.

JS: This observation links to Pellow and how he focuses on the gritty reality of work at the recycling facility despite the green image of recycling.

JF: How did *Garbage Wars* set out an EJ framework that went beyond individual/consumer-based solutions?

JS: To go back to the recycling example, the feel good discourse of recycling belies the very dangerous work in recycling facilities. Cultural studies scholar Michelle Yates argues that waste is not just about excesses of capitalism, but about excess, often racialized, labor forces that are extraneous in the contemporary city. The surface kind of environmentalism, the kind they teach in elementary schools, is that people should recycle. But Pellow focuses on the reality that this work is very dangerous, and not well compensated, and in fact, part of the existing system of production and consumption.

KS: One of the things that Pellow highlights is that the issues of recycling, or even resource management, if you will, are linked to labor concerns and other issues of international relations. I also like the fact that he talks to the workers and lets them tell their story. It's one of danger, but also one in which for some in the industry—such as the collective groups—another type of environment could be created in which their voices played an active part.

JS: There was an investigative journalist series in California about how progressive environmental policies create other environmental disasters in other US states and nations. I agree with Karen: their stories and voices are crucial.

## Environmental Justice Methodology

JF: It seems to me that these reflections on stories and voices points to a question of methodology. How do these two texts model an EJ methodology?

JS: To me, the methodology is focused on the real-world consequences of the analysis. For example, a book called *Pineros*, by Brinda Sarathy, talks about the labor politics of Latino forest workers, who face very dangerous working conditions. Reminding middle-class environmentalists that environmental policies create their own hazardous working conditions forces people to take a serious look at their own politics (one hopes).

ks: I also share that hope, Julie. It can enlighten people to stop thinking of their lives as these resource islands that need safeguarding. It can also prompt a reevaluating of space, encouraging people to consider how one community fights for recycling centers, sustainable food initiatives, and public transportation while another global space is simultaneously set up to perform as that community's disposable zone—a pleasure paradise, if you will, where sustainability matters only insofar as someone can imbibe unlimited drinks and eat whatever they fancy at their leisure.

js: Both Adamson and Pellow are seriously committed to research as well as social movements in ways that are deeply admirable. That means serious engagements with activists over long periods of time.

sr: Adamson's local pedagogy focuses on knowing both her students and local landscapes. As a result, I loved that Adamson's book contained her students' voices pointing to different parts of the novel as significant. This functions to question official landscapes.

ks: That's key, Shazia, I think, in making the landscape—and the politics of existence within it—a living entity.

js: For me, as a humanist on the humanistic social sciences front, engaged scholarship and public humanities foregrounds the role of stories (whether historical or contemporary) and storytelling.

ks: I think that one of the things that I have enjoyed seeing in recent EJ scholarship are the links to wider issues—such as food sovereignty and security, environmental inequalities, and labor rights. As a humanist who works quite seriously in political ecology in areas facing sovereignty battles, who controls what, and why, matters to me.

sr: I really enjoyed Pablo Mukherjee's materialist book on Indian novels called *Postcolonial Environments* because to me, capitalism is responsible for colonialism, imperialism, and all the ecological disasters that come from that.

ks: All of these things feature in some of the work that I am currently doing on Port Royal. Port Royal is a small fishing village in Jamaica. The Jamaica National Trust wants to preserve the treasure that lies at the bottom of the harbor at Port Royal (the largest shipwreck graveyard in

the world and a possible UNESCO site) by turning it into an eighteenth-century-styled vacation destination point—but without the prostitution, the carousing, and the general lawlessness, or any acknowledgment of imperialism and colonialism. Will it highlight slavery? No. Indigenous persons and their interactions on the island pre-Anglo contact? No. It will be a preserved British imperial hospital, museum, and pirate fun center, heavy on the fun and less on the violence and control that made it possible. This is the cultural heritage that some believe needs to be culturally and environmentally preserved.

JS: Pellow focused on the historical roots. Most policy debates are so presentist—Karen’s example is another. Global climate justice movements have worked hard to focus on the historical legacies, not just a simple if China, India, and Brazil pollute like Americans, Australians and Western Europeans, then there will be chaos. There is chaos now, which has historical roots. I think the issue is not just an urban one, as Shazia notes, but about the relationship between urban and rural, and also local and global. On the example of waste, you can see Pellow addressing these issues in his second book on the transnational waste industry, *Resisting Global Toxics*. In both books Pellow really focuses on the industry component and macro-structure and deep political history, while also keeping a focus on the stories of those who are actively resisting these forces. For me the methodology remains compelling, but again, without a sense of passion about the injustices faced, their work is just excellent research. They are, of course, stellar researchers, but their work can also contribute to changing how people, students, and policy makers understand the roots of problems and then search for complex, not simple, answers.

## Resurgent Imperialism

JF: I’d like to pose another question about transnational EJ. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon argues that we are “in an era of resurgent imperialism.”<sup>3</sup> How does *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism* reveal the continuing colonization of indigenous peoples in the United States and beyond in the context of neoliberal globalization? How does *Garbage Wars* locate US urban environments in the context of neoliberal globalization?



SR: Adamson draws our attention not only to the environmental injustices that occur outside the United States but also to the inequalities that continue to exist within the US through our own system of apartheid.

KS: This is true. And she is willing to place herself, bodily, in the midst of that seeing. One thing that comes to mind—we have to think of transnationalism in different ways. Things like the North Atlantic Gyre highlight that things move—air, water, waste—just as internationally as people.

SR: When I first read Alan Weisman on the North Atlantic Gyre and the plastic beads in our exfoliants that simply go down our drains, I couldn't focus for days. It's horrifying.

JF: Karen, would you say more? The Gyre perhaps connects with the new materialism's focus on the transcorporeal.

KS: Sure. I've been reading Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, and I quite like her take on the vibrancy of things, such as effluent. It's worth thinking through how those things—and the seeming rise of non-places (in tandem) seem to surround some on the planet. We have the Gyre on one hand and some of the largest shopping malls in the world where entire cities could fit inside. This seems especially off balance. But to return to transcorporeality or other aspects of new materialism, I think part of our task as thinkers and activists interested in these issues is to link them. We have the Gyre, but so few actually study it. I'm interested in thinking of it as an island. What changes when that occurs? How is it made just as much as Atlantis in the Bahamas? Most folks would think that connecting the two would seem strange, but both are islands of an almost spastic virtuality.

SR: And both are garbage.

KS: So true, Shazia. So true. But the Gyre moves. What's fascinating is that it moves and swirls taking with it our waste. In essence, it is eating our discarded consumer matter and feeding it to the sea and the many species that depend on the marine world for subsistence. This highlights, to me, the transcorporeality of matter. In considering this trash island, how best do we engage with it? How do we take something such as plastic—with its intangible life and afterlife—and examine its *some-*

*thing else-ness* as it transforms into something quite deadlier the smaller that it becomes? What is its landscape?

SR: I've been thinking about Adamson's focus on the middle place between official and vernacular landscapes. And Nixon's focus on the vernacular more than the official landscape and I've been thinking about their positions in terms of whether or not one is a position of compromise or not. I don't know.

KS: Interesting, Shazia. With the move to the common as perhaps another turn to consider.

SR: Nixon emphasizes the vernacular landscape because it includes the history of a place and its relations to people who live on it. But in the end I don't think Adamson is compromising so much as drawing our attention to another view and asking us to consider that in addition to the official.

KS: I agree, Shazia. I think that both are quite conscious of voice and narrative. Even Adamson works with her students in tandem with, but sometimes in opposition to, literature.

## Engaged Scholarship

KS: Shazia, how do you see engaged scholarship helping to break the cycle of capitalism, imperialism, and ecological disasters?

SR: The way that engaged scholarship can break the cycle is by first acknowledging the ways in which both capitalism and colonialism have shaped our world. For instance, I teach environmental literature from Australia as representing a kind of victory of capitalism because in one story, Barry Hill's "Lizards," the factories that are polluting the air and causing the narrator's mother's illness are also curing her by making the medicine she relies on. This is the cycle of the horribly complicated world we live in. I don't have one easy answer except to say that drawing attention to these vicious cycles in our scholarship might steer us all away from simplistic ways of knowing and understanding our world. When we are better able to understand these cycles, then and only then can we figure out what to give up, change, or do away with. I would also say that engaged scholarship should foster links between EJ movements here and abroad. After all, capitalism is global and so we should also be.

ks: That's interesting, Shazia. I just finished teaching Tiphany Yanique's *How to Escape from a Leper Colony*. It has a brilliant short story that is a parable about bridges. It includes the voice of an island that is between things. The interwoven vignettes end with the destruction of the bridge. This destruction seems to be because of a fault with the design. Yanique makes it clear that the destruction comes from the Caribbean itself. The students were floored by thinking of the links between the environment and development. I think that it is helpful to stress the interwovenness of so many of these issues. Haiti is currently in the midst of a Year of the Environment. In many ways it means ameliorating past harms by internal—and significantly, external—forces. Officials are planting trees to replace the ones used by folks, now, for fuel, but also the ones taken for the timber industry at the behest of the US Marines when they occupied Haiti in 1915.

JS: I like that word—"interwovenness." That's what EJ is.

ks: I agree. EJ gives voice to the tangled web of life that has marked many in disparate ways.

JF: What is your vision for engaged scholarship in the environmental humanities—and how did these texts point you in that direction?

ks: In many ways I think Adamson's middle place included placing herself as recorder, and not as critic. I think that this has to be at the core of any vision of engaged scholarship. I love Adamson's desire to learn. It's a kind of fearlessness that's not about wandering the wilderness in her camper van, but walking the land with a people constantly having to renegotiate how they walk, and for whom. That to me is the charge of environmental humanities.

SR: Yes, Adamson's work has inspired me to emphasize the vernacular landscapes of the past and present. Engaged scholarship has to engage the world we live in, its crises, inequalities, and the structural and institutional ways in which it works to continue to replicate those injustices whether they occur in postcolonial places or in Euro-North America.

ks: For me Pellow's book pinpointed how much we take for granted when we seek to cure and fix problems. In highlighting the cycles of garbage, he showed how tangled choice is with power . . . and how much conflict is tied with rights.

JS: I think there is a considerable overlap between environmental humanities and environmental justice, primarily in the areas of praxis and impact. I've been involved in a number of different environmental humanities projects, based on research on the Central Valley and activism and community development. Most recently I've been co-directing a Mellon Initiative for Environment and Society, and am a board member of a new environmental humanities initiative housed out of ASU. What these projects share with each other, and with environmental justice, are key values and concerns. Like environmental justice, environmental humanities is thriving—in some ways, paradoxically in part, because the problems of injustice and pollution/crises intensifying.

#### NOTES

1. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.
2. Nixon, *Slow Violence*.
3. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 37.

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