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# Engaged Scholarship in the Vernacular Landscape

A Conversation

JONI ADAMSON AND DAVID NAGUIB PELLOW

## Messy Politics

DAVID: One of the things I sought to attend to with *Garbage Wars* was to take seriously the EJ movement's key declaration that the environment is where we live, work, play, and worship—with particular emphasis on “work.” That work includes the labor that employees at recycling firms do, the energy that companies and elected officials put into designing and locating waste management systems in communities of color, the labor of activists to seek a modicum of environmental justice under such circumstances, and the work that nonhuman natures engage in, around, and through us every moment. I also wanted to address some of the complexities that EJ politics reveal, including the ways that race, class, and political power can divide communities and move vulnerable people to support decisions that appear to run counter to the interests of public health and environmental and social justice. My thought was that if we ignore the messiness of EJ politics, then we ignore the realities of life in communities facing environmental injustices across the planet. On that note, Rahman's discussion of the “Lizards” story reminds me of an electronic waste/EJ activist's ironic comment that, without computers and cell phones, the global movement around e-waste injustice would not be able to do the work they do and develop and share the knowledge they produce, which allows them to mobilize across national borders against the IT industry. So the same materials

that have brought this global scourge upon us have also made it possible to track, monitor, and manage that crisis.

JONI: *Garbage Wars* has been important to me precisely because it modeled engaged scholarship and focused on work. It spoke to me in very personal ways, too. I am the first person in my family to graduate from high school. To afford college I took a leave in my sophomore year and worked three jobs simultaneously. One of my jobs was park maintenance worker. I wore a hard hat, set sprinklers, and cleaned up trash. At the end of the day I hauled waste to the dump in a beat-up city truck. My co-worker humored me as I meticulously pulled out and bagged every aluminum can. For me this labor was obviously not about feel good discourse or saving the planet. It was about whether or not I would be able to complete college. Once a week, I went to cash in my cans. I saw for myself the issues that David writes about: recycling is a dangerous and dirty job that does not pay well. This helps to explain why one of the main themes of *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism* (AIL) is work, and why concepts of wilderness must account for the necessity of and consequences of human work in the world. It also helps to explain why, after publication of AIL, you could find me sitting at the edge of a Nogales, Mexico, garbage dump with my longtime *comadre* (comother), Teresa Leal, listening to her stories of Opata grandparents drawing water from nearby springs now polluted with toxins dumped by US-owned *maquilas* (factories) from the trucks rumbling past us on the dirt road (see Joni Adamson's "Throwing Rocks at the Sun"). However, it wasn't until I read books like *Garbage Wars* and *Power, Justice, and the Environment* (PJE) that I began more deeply to understand the global reach and impact of environmental inequality and, as David puts it, the messiness of EJ politics. PJE helped me understand that my work was a part of a field that David was calling "critical environmental justice studies." He and his contributors are really clear that figuring out our collective responses to this global scourge will be more complicated than we thought and that thinking in terms of structural politics and institutions about supply lines and ecosystems will be key to this work, as both Sze and Rahman also point out.

### The Middle Place

DAVID: Joni's work offers a model of interdisciplinary, engaged, transnational scholarship that spans, connects, and advances the fields of

American studies, ethnic studies, ecocriticism, and environmental justice studies (to name just a few). *AIL* was the first book to bring American Indian literature into conversation with EJ studies and ecocriticism and opened up a world of possibilities for people like me who were stuck in the often mechanistic and nearsighted realm of the social sciences. Joni's work reveals productive and exciting modes of linking social science and science, case studies of EJ struggles, and policy research with literature, poetry, and literary methods and analysis. I also have a deep appreciation for her capacity to bridge her writing (which abounds with its own prose, poetics, and lyricism) with pedagogy and public action. In particular the narratives she writes of her work with Native American students who produced essays and conversations that connect the literature of Sherman Alexie, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich to everyday life and struggle on and off the reservation moved me to take these books off my shelf and place them on my bedside table once again.

JONI: I was in grad school during the decade of "high theory" in literary studies. But long term engagement with the people I am writing about in *AIL* inspired me to push back against the notion that local peoples do not theorize or that their experiences and oral traditions do not have explanatory power in modern contexts, or that what I call the "vernacular landscape" cannot be a rich source of relevant knowledge about culture and ecosystems today. The notion of a vernacular landscape (which was first written about by John Brinkerhoff Jackson, who contrasted it with what he called an extractive "official landscape") is important to my first articulation of these ideas.<sup>1</sup> Citing *AIL*, Rob Nixon also picks up on Jackson's concept of the vernacular in *Slow Violence*.<sup>2</sup>

As Rahman notes, some critics have asked whether my notion of a "middle place" between the vernacular and the official implies a romanticized compromise of some sort. The term "middle place" is taken from anthropologist Dennis Tedlock's translation of the Zuni cosmological concept of "home" as a "middle place," and therefore, linked to the Puebloan and Diné peoples I write about in *AIL*, including the groups active at Black Mesa on the Navajo Nation at the time. I use "middle place" as shorthand to convey the environmental justice slogan that people active in the movement are working for the places in which they live, work, play, and worship.

I think it is important to note that I am explicit in the book in arguing that people are constantly, and should be constantly, moving back and forth *through* the middle place, between the official and vernacular, between the global and the local, and that there is no stasis or idealistic compromise in the middle. Rather, *AIL* is one of the first EJ ecocritical studies to emphasize the transnational connections, flows, and tensions that Salt finds crucial to conversations about the global North and South. Since there has always been movement and migration in the Americas, and a sense of connection between the local and the larger world, the official and the vernacular are constantly informing and contesting each other. The middle place is contingent, it is a “place and politics of articulation,” it is a “place to see,” it is a place to enter for negotiation, a place to assess where we are at and where we are going, it is a responsibility to learn to converse with and respond to other actors, both human and nonhuman, in an articulate and articulating world.<sup>3</sup>

DAVID: For me, the middle place that Joni articulates is the necessity of learning and engaging one another’s histories in order to create alliances and collaborations that might seem impossible but are necessary for moving toward environmental and social justice. Joni’s concept underscores that we must be open to learning and listening to those we may be in conflict with if we are to transform this world. Nelson Mandela famously did this in an encounter with an Apartheid-era South African prime minister and colleagues who were speechless as he narrated some of the histories and tribulations of white South Africans prior to their construction of a white supremacist state. His message was that we are all struggling for a better world and we need to figure out a way to inhabit that world together. Egbal Amhad once described Israel and Palestine as two communities of suffering—a reality that not enough people inside and outside that part of the world are willing to embrace, but a language that holds boundless potential if we could only speak it.

JONI: We know that the histories of the groups involved in EJ struggles go back not just decades but hundreds of years. Salt’s work on Haiti reveals how far we might say the environmental justice movement extends backward in time. What we see emerging from this extensive history is a set of international documents, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Cochabamba Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth and Climate Change, and the UN

Convention on Biological Diversity, which are making the proliferating environmentalism(s) of the poor much more visible, and thus making some of the earliest critical environmental justice studies, like *AIL* and *Garbage Wars*, even more legible. These groups describe what they are doing as “cosmopolitical”: what they are doing is as much connected to the cosmos as it is to the smallest evidence of sentience in soils, water, and air.

## Troubled Wilderness

DAVID: I have varied and sometimes conflicted connections to so much of what Joni writes about in *AIL*. With regard to the need to challenge the narratives of escape to pristine nature so common in nature writing, I must confess that one of the many reasons I became active in environmental struggles was because of my childhood experiences of camping and hiking many summers in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. But one of the first things my father pointed out to me was that this is a place where indigenous (Cherokee) people have been expelled and relegated to the status of a tourist curiosity. As I swam the ponds, creeks, rivers, and picked berries and dodged hungry black bears in the Smokies, I was conscious that there were very few people of color in those spaces. My father always carried a firearm during our trips there, not for protection against the bears, but out of a real concern that we might encounter Southern white vigilante violence as some of the only folks of color in those otherwise peaceful woods. So while we loved the idea of getting back to nature, we were never so naïve as to think of that nature as separable from human activity and cultural politics.

Joni writes beautifully about the Four Corners region, an area I visit every year because I have family there. But as a settler, I struggle with my position during my time in that region in ways that are both distinct and no different from my struggle with that reality anywhere else in the US. As I reread Adamson’s extraordinary chapter “Abbey’s Country” (about nature writing and environmentalist icon Edward Abbey who inspired the founding of the radical environmental group Earth First! which has historically had a troubled relationship with Native peoples and immigrants, and the EJ movement), I felt the tug of war inside me as someone who has been active in both the environmental justice *and* Earth First! movements for more than twenty years. I have a romantic

and perhaps doomed vision of bringing those movements into closer conversation with one another.

JONI: I also have a conflicted relationship with my writing about wilderness. I grew up fishing almost every summer weekend on the Blackfoot River in Idaho. I am drawn to the beauty of wild rivers, but also to the collective responses we are seeing around the world among indigenous groups, scholars, and politicians. This is why my recent work on blockbuster films like *Avatar* is calling attention to the places where people are involved in “real” Avatar-scale battles. The Dongria Kondh, a tribe in Eastern India, for example, posted a YouTube video titled *The Real Avatar* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4tutfz3wXQ>). The film narrates their (successful) battle to stop mining giant Vedanta Resources from siting a bauxite mine (from which aluminum is made) on their sacred mountain, Nayam Raja. Clearly, I continue to be inspired by my aluminum recycling days!

DAVID: Sze, Salt, Fiskio, and Rahman discuss the importance of engaged scholarship and storytelling and I believe these two practices must be at the center of EJ studies.

JONI: I couldn’t agree more. It has been such an honor to have this discussion with this amazing group. In *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship*, we try to provide models for how one might write about and participate in engaged scholarship. Contributors, including Salt and Pellow, go behind and beyond the “tragedy of the commons” to illustrate, and these are David’s words taken from our discussion here, “how we might listen, communicate, and act effectively in transformative and imaginative ways to address the socioecological challenges we face together.”<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, 89–93.

2. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 17.

3. Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, 159–61.

4. We would like to thank Janet Fiskio, Shazia Rahman, Karen Salt, and Julie Sze—scholars whose work we believe is critical to producing and supporting transformative ideas and possibilities for social and environmental justice—for their contributions to this forum.

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