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Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 1, Number
1, Winter 2013, (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



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Startling Feeling

Environmental Scholarship amid the
Tangled Roots of Imperialism

KAREN SALT

On January 12, 2010, the world witnessed an environmental catastrophe that highlighted the uneven development and uneven justice within (and toward) Haiti. In less than forty seconds in and around the capital city of Port-au-Prince, tremors pulled down buildings, opened the ground like a gaping wound, and brought a nation to its knees. In what seemed like an instant, nearly two million people found themselves internally displaced from their homes. About a quarter of a million lost their lives. Social movement and justice organizer Beverly Bell recently notes that “some would call the earthquake *goudougoudou*, for the terrifying sound that roared up out of the ground . . . [but] the day was so defining it simply came to be known as *douz*, twelve.”¹ Almost immediately, nations, activists, and others gathered together teams in an uncoordinated dance of assistance. Money poured in from all quarters. According to anthropologist and activist Mark Schuller and Pablo Morales, billions were sent or promised to Haiti; little of it has made it to the people.

Journalists and scholars have chronicled this moment, noting the ways that capitalism found a willing bed during a crisis and cross-dressed profit and exploitation as salvation. Community activists began fighting countless battles on the ground and in the media in order to self-actualize their own version of their futures—not the one handed to them by the NGO-state and its many corporate allies. And yet, still, well-intentioned international foundations erected factories in dubi-

ous places and tens of thousands remain without homes, even as the Royal Oasis, a five-star hotel, has now opened for business in the affluent and gated suburbs of Port-au-Prince, not far from a US military-administered tent city for displaced persons.

Many observers and activists feared that the poor sanitary conditions of the tent cities after the January earthquake would prove a breeding ground for disease. They were right. There is a new addition to this well-trod story of disaster capitalism and neoliberalism: cholera. The first cases of cholera, an intestinal bacterial infection primarily obtained from ingesting food and water contaminated by bacterium, appeared in October 2010, mere months after the catastrophe. Panic ensued. Fingers were pointed. Questions bubbled forth asking how a disease never before recorded in Haiti could become the world's largest cholera epidemic. Consistently scientific evidence points toward a foreign agent:—a peacekeeper. It is perhaps not ironic that a unit tied to the United Nations Stabilizing Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) would be tapped as the destabilizing factor of this health and environmental crisis. Although the UN quibbles on its responsibility for the crisis, the fallout continues in the courts (for restitution by the infected) and in the communities of Haiti as more than eight thousand have died and nearly half a million have become sick. And the rainy season has started, again, along with increasing fears of rising numbers of infections.

This environmental threat, however, has old roots. Decades before the earthquake, lifesaving water treatment had been denied Haitian officials by US government agencies intent on punishing the people for their government's past political activities. Decades before that, when the US military occupied Haiti, it enforced the culling of most of Haiti's forest for its dreams of a timber industry. Old roots. Old flows of consumption and exploitation. I begin with this story because its entanglements contain concepts that lie at the heart of the field of environmental justice.

This book review section of *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* is a retrospective that reassesses and revisits two of the works that have helped align environmental justice studies with social justice and unveil the pathways to a critical pedagogy of engaged being that draws out the transnational circuits of power. I know that my work on Caribbean political ecology and island eco-aesthetics would not be possible without Joni Adamson's and David Pellow's scholarly efforts to

pull ethnic studies, American studies, and environmental justice into conversation with each other. Many of us transnational and transdisciplinary hitchhikers owe a debt to these scholars for showing us how to navigate the muddy waters of academia while remaining true to our mission to walk well in the world. So, from all of us to Pellow and Adamson: a thanks and a plea—please keep writing and challenging us to tease out our assumptions about space, race, capitalism, and belonging.

I would like to take this time to link their works with other texts in environmental justice studies that exemplify the turns in the field to non-US spaces, human rights, and other critical conceptualizations that have moved beyond urban-rural considerations in the United States. These moves, if you will, highlight the global importance of this work, as well as the continuous adaptations and expansion of environmental humanities scholarship. As novel as these works may be, they represent a continuous chain of cultural agitation and political challenge regarding social and environmental crises that date back centuries.

Adamson makes a convincing case about this very point in a recent review in *American Quarterly* in which she stresses that the roots of the environmental movement “could be traced back to the abolition movement, which revealed the connections between colonization, conquest, slavery, resource exploitation, and capital.”² She goes on to argue that the environmental movement owed a debt to other movements—such as the civil rights movement. This assertion rings just as true for the movement as the field of environmental justice. As noted in the forum, there are tangled legacies that draw space, landscape, and the environment into conversation with colonialism, empire, neoliberalism, capital, and globalized labor practices. Any efforts to work through these issues has to be prepared to riff across disciplinary boundaries in order to search for and garner useful “truths” and whispers of possible solutions to the grand socioecological challenges before us as a species, a member of the commons, and as a local participant within some type of unit, be it a nation, city, village, tribe, or a merger of all four. In many ways environmental justice scholarship is an assemblage, in the artistic sense; something built up from fragments of found meaning and form to become something else, something tangible, vibrant, and engaged with the world. While this review looks forward from Adamson’s and Pellow’s texts, it truly looks backward and forward, reflecting on the similar challenges and perspectives taking place in environmental justice (and related) studies today.

Published about a year apart, *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago* and *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism* (AIL) correspond to two vastly different aspects of EJ scholarship. Pellow's book is, even with its many nuances, a sociological work that investigates the cyclical conflicts that have shaped and continue to influence garbage wars in Chicago. Although it is concerned with the social, labor, and environmental problems connected to waste disposal faced by a particular city, it is also a deeply informed historiography of disposability in one Midwestern US city. Pellow stresses that he consciously sought out different methodologies—including ethnography—in order to “not only uncover where the people and hazards are located . . . but also to] provide a social and political context for environmental policy and environmental struggles.”³ He takes this interdisciplinary journey precisely because he believes, even as a sociologist, that “historical methods offer a way to uncover the origins of environmental inequality and reveal ‘how we got into this mess.’”⁴

Pellow, though, is not just content to trace history; he wants to uncover the cyclical processes undergirding the problems of waste and proffer a way out of the continued mess that reproduces environmental inequalities' and/or environmental hazards' structures of power. This, in many ways, is Pellow's major contribution with this work. Rather than praising environmental groups or offering a Goliath-framed historiography that places environmental justice organizations as victims in the battle to protect their communities, Pellow targets the entire system and considers the ways that environmental justice advocates are implicated in the perpetuation or creation of environmental inequalities and/or environmental racism. He does this not to argue that these groups “are the principle forces producing these problems.” Instead, he highlights how “EJ and environmental groups are not without fault in these processes. And because of the power that industry government and affluent communities wield, they can shape and limit the choices of movements groups.”⁵ In essence, this groundbreaking work is as much about the social problems imbedded within the unequal distribution in Chicago of pollution and contaminants related to the waste industry as it is about how best to “move [all of us] toward an environmentally just future.”⁶ His final two sentences convey the planetary import of linking—and dismantling—these issues: “Environmental justice in Chicago, the United States, and on Mother Earth will never be achieved

without resisting corporate power and the ideology of profit before people and the environment that supports it. A more difficult task, however, will be undoing the colonial legacies that many of us support and reinforce every day”⁷

At the heart of Adamson’s investigations in *AIL* is a similar desire to undo legacies of exclusion. In searching for “common ground” and a “middle place” in order to understand and work toward “transformative change,” Adamson argues for an ecocriticism that responds to oppression and exploitation. In her reading of indigenous writers, such as Simon Ortiz, she “examines why we must develop more multiculturally inclusive concepts of nature, justice, and place that are rooted not only in deep, reciprocal relationships to the natural world, but in our diverse cultural histories, in our different relationships to colonial oppression, and in the consequences of race and class marginalization.”⁸ Adamson also offers a striking critique of nature writing and some of its foundational sculptors who moved through nature and envisioned an empty landscape purged of people, antagonisms, and oppression—a place without a history and a place devoid of others’ histories. She critiques turns toward and searches for Nature, a pristine and abundant land operationalized as a counter-space to the urban and destructive blight of global modern cities. She argues that by reading the stories—both oral and narrative—of indigenous peoples, critics can begin to appreciate a vernacular landscape “replete with meaning and significance for the people who have lived there for long periods of time and often in circumstances in which they have suffered a marginalization and impoverishment connected to the degradation of their environment.”⁹ With this investigation, Adamson does more than merely offer a glimpse into an indigenous perspective on space, race, oppression, and colonialism. In her travels onto the reservation and her engagements with her indigenous students, Adamson begins to build up and walk through a form of being and learning that is reflective and challenging. This is not an experiment in academic methods, but a sincere attempt to discover and craft a more just world. Her final sentence illuminates the impetus of a work that travels through a vast narrative, oral, and imaginary terrain: “My goal has been to theorize a way of reading that provides us with the tools we need for building a more satisfying multicultural ecocriticism and a more inclusive, multicultural environmentalism that can be united with other social movements to create a more liveable world for humans and nonhumans alike.”¹⁰

The impact of this tool building becomes apparent when one examines the proliferation of EJ texts that have appeared in the last six years. This time period is bracketed by two telling awards in the field: the American Studies Association's John Hope Franklin Best Book for Julie Sze's *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (2006) and the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment's Scholarly Book Award for Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2013). While the rest of this review will discuss these texts, it will also, briefly, touch upon a work that is less well known in ecocritical circles; namely, David Vine's *Island of Shame: The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia* (2009), a startling book of feeling. *Island of Shame*, in concert with the other texts examined here, asks that critics, activists, students, and citizens affectively move through the world not to search for a pristine and unaffected wildness, but to actually hear, see, sense, and engage with each other as one of the species that inhabit this planet. We have to be of this place, in many ways, in order to challenge the ways that its environmental future is spread on the crumbs of humanity's past exploitations.

In many ways, Sze's book takes stock of the afterlife of these political and economic ecologies in her book, stating, at one point, that "land and environment are the means through which capital extracts profit in an increasingly privatized and corporate city."¹¹ An investigation into what could be described as the "racial geography of environmental justice activism" in four New York communities, Sze's book moves within similar territory as Pellow's, going beyond quantitative methodologies to get at the discursive frames of environmental justice activism.¹² As a text that links health, waste, energy deregulation, environmental pollution, and activism, Sze's work offers the same fearless personal writing that infuses Adamson's text. The real intimacy occurs in the acknowledgments, a place where Sze allows the reader to feel her constricted exhalations as she travels through the active pollutants that free fell after the attack on the World Trade Center and experience her wonder at defending her thesis project as her baby moves and her city was enshrined in an energy crisis. In noting the pulses and pulls of energy and protection, pollution and dis-ease, Sze offers us a book that does more than merely frame the discourse of environmental racism—it breathes it into life and notes its peripatetic hauntings within the landscape of one city.

Rob Nixon's impressive *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of*

the Poor is the latest attempt to make visible the invisibility of environmental and political violence. Nixon writes this book as an urgent call to deal with this slow violence—what he describes as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”¹³ For Nixon this violence is neither catastrophic, nor epic, but it is critically dangerous. “Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of war, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively.”¹⁴ Nixon argues that the way to make these conditions and processes visible is to focus on the stories, images, and symbols that attempt to render them as more than out there, ephemeral impossibilities. Along with this aesthetic engagement, Nixon examines writer-activists who, for lack of a better word, have a vexed relationship with environmental causes and/or the environmentalism of the poor. Nixon, however, is just as interested in imagining the next phases of ecocriticism, postcolonialism, and American studies. He surveys the current scholarly terrain and comes away bolstered by possibilities, noting that “at the end of the twenty-first century’s first decade, we are witnessing, across a range of intellectual fronts, some heartening initiatives that are starting to change hitherto dominant conceptions of what it might mean to green the humanities.”¹⁵ These initiatives can be seen in the scholarly production within this journal and in the creative outputs of its many contributors. Yet, as the Haiti cholera case that I began with highlights, there is still so much work to be done before we can even begin to move toward a more just and historically responsive world. It is perhaps appropriate that I let Nixon warn us about celebrating too soon: “Despite the recent advances . . . ours remains an ongoing, ambitious, and crucial task.”¹⁶

Island of Shame suggests the import of expanding environmental justice scholarship beyond US borders and beyond considerations of corporate versus communal or development versus natural dichotomies. An anthropologist by training and profession, Vine, in an intricately researched text, chronicles how and why the United States and the United Kingdom displaced a community of island peoples in order to ecologically manufacture what many describe as the largest military base in the world. This book details the history of that island, Diego Garcia—an

island in the Indian Ocean administered by the British government—and its people. It draws out the ways that the island's ecology (and geopolitical location) enabled two global powers in the late twentieth century to systematically restrict and deny the rights of the Chagosians (as the islanders are known) to their island home. The book also, as an environmental justice text, documents the islanders' fight against this militarized neocolonialism. It details the gathering of experts, activists, and Chagosians as they fought for (and for a time, won) the right of the island people to return to their homeland. Part ethnography, part investigative journalism, *Island of Shame* is an important work that hints at the ways that environmental justice and human rights are deeply implicated in the battles against the imperial industrial complex. I highlight this book for a number of reasons, but mostly because it is a story with links to Bikini Atoll (an island in the Pacific) and Navassa Island (an island in the Caribbean). It may be an old story of ecological imperialism in the name of militarization, but it is one that we must add to the vocabulary of environmental justice. We must combat the invisibility of this (and other) environmental and human rights conflicts. Vine, in a long and damning passage, challenges us to read and see these activities, and “unmake the ways in which our ability to make both war and money has trumped human lives,” in order to “shift US foreign policy and the national security bureaucracy that runs it away from deep-seated imperial instincts, away from the pursuit of economic and military interests benefiting the few, away from engrained hierarchical notions that some human lives are more valuable than others.”¹⁷ In many ways, what Vine calls for is a “common place” where justice can be formed and made visible.

NOTES

1. Bell, *Fault Lines*, 1.
2. Adamson, “What Winning Looks Like,” 1258.
3. Pellow, *Garbage Wars*, 13.
4. Pellow, *Garbage Wars*, 13.
5. Pellow, *Garbage Wars*, 129.
6. Pellow, *Garbage Wars*, 129.
7. Pellow, *Garbage Wars*, 129.
8. Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, xix.
9. Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, 17.
10. Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, 185.

11. Sze, *Noxious New York*, 21.
12. Sze, *Noxious New York*, 21.
13. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.
14. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.
15. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 260.
16. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 262.
17. Vine, *Island of Shame*, 192.

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