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Publication Date

2016-10-01

DOI

10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.06.018

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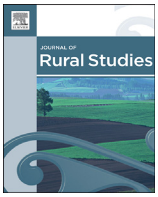
Journal of Rural Studies 47 (2016) 381–386

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud



Environmental justice and rural studies: A critical conversation and invitation to collaboration

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Loka Ashwood and Katherine MacTavish have done an outstanding job of editing a collection of papers by a group of scholars who have produced groundbreaking work on myriad rural dimensions of environmental justice scholarship and politics. To my knowledge, this special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* is the first of its kind, and it is truly timely. These contributors bring a range of research methods, epistemologies, disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and emphases on a broad and varied set of landscapes and geographies unlike any project I have seen in the field of EJ studies. Ashwood and MacTavish's introduction to this volume offers a deeply insightful conceptual framework through which to view the links among rurality, democracy, inequality, and environmental justice. Their analysis of de Tocqueville's concept *tyranny of the majority* is momentous and offers a productively unsettling framework for thinking through the problem of nation-states with respect to future scholarship and politics focused on environmental (in)justice in rural, urban and other settings. In what follows, I offer my thoughts on the significance of each of these papers and the volume as a whole.

As a number of the authors in this special issue point out, the rural dimensions of environmental justice studies have long been present, but generally only in the background, rarely foregrounded, centered, or taken seriously as a social, ecological, cultural, economic, and political category that shapes EJ struggles everyday. For example, many of the early environmental justice movement battlegrounds in the U.S. took place in rural communities like Warren County, North Carolina and Kettleman City, California. But the dominant framing of those cases was around racial and class inequalities, while the spatial relationships and tensions between urban and rural communities was rarely sufficiently theorized. This special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* features innovative and path-breaking scholarship that seeks to bring the rural to the center of EJ studies and engage this category in all of its complexity.

I often describe myself as an environmental sociologist, as do a number of senior environmental justice studies scholars. Environmental sociology emerged as a response to the increasing evidence that urbanization and industrialization were producing severe ecological consequences around the globe. Environmental sociology is a field that owes much of its origins to rural sociology and rural studies and has, until recently, struggled to gain a foothold at the center of the discipline of Sociology. Ironically, one of the fields that arguably gave environmental sociology a much-needed shot in the arm and heightened visibility in recent years—Environmental Justice Studies—has also contributed to shifting its attention away from rural spaces toward urban centers. That would not be a concern if EJ studies scholars were paying serious and close attention to the ways that urban and rural spaces are inextricably linked and bound up in intricate and highly uneven and unequal processes. But that focus has been largely absent in the literature. Interestingly, a close relative of EJ studies is Food Justice studies—an emergent field that brings together many of the practices we traditionally associate with rural spaces such as agriculture, food production, and distribution with urban community politics (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Anguelovski, 2014). Through food justice work, people from urban communities of color are collaborating with people of color and white allies in both urban and rural settings across this country to reconnect with rural spaces, traditions, and knowledge, thereby blurring the lines between the urban and rural, and consumer and producer. Increasingly, EJ studies is taking a closer look at Food Justice Studies for direction on this point and could be a critically important window and pathway for bridging rural studies and EJ scholarship (as the contributing authors to this special issue have done so well).

To be fair, there are a number of notable EJ studies that are based on rural or largely rural areas that merit some mention here. Bullard (2000) classic *Dumping in Dixie* chronicles the struggles of a number of African American communities in the Southern U.S., including Emelle, Alabama; Alsen, Louisina; and Institute, West Virginia, and Timmons Roberts and Melissa Toffolon-Weiss's (2001) *Chronicles from the Environmental Justice Frontline* centers its analysis on several rural EJ struggles in the state of Louisiana. Recent research on EJ and water management conflicts in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region of California (Sze et al., 2010) and on pesticide drift in and around agricultural communities of California (Harrison, 2011) reveal that basic access to safe water, soil, and air is not enjoyed by many communities of color in rural America. Historian Richard Mizelle's (2014) *Backwater Blues*, is a re-reading of the 1927 Mississippi Flood through an EJ lens. That flood killed untold numbers of people and revealed the depths of

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.06.018

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environmental racism directed at black people by a white supremacist state and its regulatory apparatus in the Mississippi delta region—a rural space if ever there was one. Studies by scholars examining the resource wars and ongoing colonization of indigenous peoples' lands in North America are almost entirely centered in rural environs (Gedicks, 2001; LaDuke, 1999). Research on the EJ struggles of Chicana/o and Hispana/o communities in the American Southwest to maintain access to land, water, and cultural resources also locates these dynamics in rural spaces (Peña, 1999; Pulido, 1996). And writings by scholars studying EJ conflicts in Appalachian coal communities suggest a critical interest in exploring environmental justice challenges in what is often thought of as quintessentially rural America (Bell, 2016; R. Scott, 2010b). In a wonderful book edited by Sarah Neal and Julian Agyeman (2006), they and their colleagues explore the intersections of ethnicity, nation, and space, and how the whiteness of Britain's rural areas—its countryside—is being challenged by multicultural transformations affecting the rest of the nation as well, resulting in new imaginings and practices of "rural citizenship" (Neal and Agyeman, 2006). Finally, echoing much of the foundational work in EJ studies, Mei Mei Evans (2002) writes about the ways in which "Nature"—in the form of wild, rural spaces—is often a site of foreboding, dread, exclusion, and violence for people of color, women, and queer folk. For many of these populations, "Nature" is not only a "masculinist social construction, but one that is racist and heterosexist as well" (Evans, 2002, p. 191). Having noted these outstanding works and their clear relevance to the intersection between EJ studies and rural studies, I am compelled to point out that—with the important exception of Neal and Agyeman (2006)—the concept of rurality and rural studies as a field are simply not at the heart of this literature. Thus the need for the work featured in this volume is clear and it is long overdue.

A few observations are in order to place this volume in a broader context. The encroachment of urbanization and industrialization on rural spaces in the U.S. and Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries was a dynamic that shaped the shift from largely instrumentalist to sentimentalist views of nonhuman animals and ecosystems, giving rise to environmental and animal welfare movements. These processes continue today with even greater intensity, sparking a range of emotions and reactions from despair and nihilism to radical ecological politics. In the 21st century, the majority of humans reside in urban areas and this raises urgent questions about what this mean for rural studies and the very concept of rurality, to say nothing of what it means for the changing character of cities (including megacities and global cities) and the core concepts underlying urban studies. Given that urban and rural communities are inextricably linked through, for example, shared ecosystems, production, consumption, migration, family ties and myriad other relationships, one might ask whether the rural/urban divide is a dualism or binary that has been blurred to the point that we might be better off questioning the distinction. But the distinction is real because, among other reasons, it serves to structure our current daily lives and future possibilities around this ever changing but persistent dualism. But like other dualisms, this one also creates oppositional thinking, relationships, and hierarchies that serve a particular set of interests and disadvantage others.

As rural communities face threats associated with environmental injustice, extractivism, mining, pesticide drift, nuclear power, prison construction, hydroelectric dams, political and economic marginalization, and militarized state violence, it would appear that the integrity and future of rural spaces has never been at greater risk. Rural-urban socioecological tensions are also on full display—if we know to look for it—when human migration flows move from rural areas to urban centers within and across national borders, as we have seen in the U.S. Mexico region and in China. Immigration and nativist politics frequently flare up and intersect with environmental politics when national and urban/rural divides are threatened and crossed. The reasons for paying closer attention to the intersections between rurality and environmental injustice are too many to list here, so I will now consider the significance of each of the papers in the volume.

1. Comments on the papers in this volume

In Masterman-Smith et al.'s paper (this volume), they begin with the observation that EJ-related research and governmental policy in Australia have been, at best, "patchy and thin." This is despite the fact that mining and large-scale animal agriculture (e.g., broiler farms and feed lots) are major economic sectors in that nation, have clear negative impacts on marginalized communities and ecosystems, and show little signs of abatement. Rural communities in Australia face environmental hazards like noise, smoke, pesticide drift, water pollution, land grabs, and the destruction of indigenous and non-indigenous cultural resources by these industries. In response, the environmental justice movement in Australia is organizing and has been impressive in its topical and geographic scope. But the urban-rural divide persists and rears its head in the form of the lack of procedural justice for many rural residents because legal services, the courts, and tribunals tend to be concentrated in the cities and so are the most politically empowered decision makers. Thus, those officials are often far removed from the everyday realities of rural environmental injustice challenges. The result is that the environmental hazards facing rural people are out of sight and out of mind for urban-based policy makers, and so are the rural residents themselves. This paper's command of the spatial relationships that structure and facilitate environmental injustices is rare and is an example of how EJ politics in rural communities can serve as a model for thinking through connections and disconnections that make global EJ movement organizing particularly challenging and rewarding.

Malin and DeMaster's study (this volume) of EJ conflicts in Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale region highlights the productive and troubling linkages between environmental injustice in rural communities and intersectoral natural resource dependence. The dynamics unfolding in this context are complex and revealing of how vulnerabilities across economic sectors can provide affected communities with both benefits and troubling risks. Small and mid-sized farmers who accept deals to have companies extract natural gas via hydraulic fracturing under their land receive financial gains but generally do so because farming has been such a volatile and risky business. Furthermore, the pollution and public health threats that result from natural gas extraction often prove to be worthy of major concerns. The "devil's bargain" farmers strike produces money in their dwindling bank accounts, accompanied by procedural inequities around negotiating and enforcing lease agreements and the environmental risks that come with unconventional natural gas operations. While many EJ scholars assume that land ownership might strengthen the bargaining and political power of community residents, this study demonstrates that this is often not the case—that meaningful participation in decision making about natural gas operations is elusive for farmers who own the land on which these practices take place because they are unprepared for the pressure and outright bullying that corporations bring to bear on them. That is a hard lesson experienced by many indigenous communities around the globe as well and this paper's findings are therefore relevant across many cultural and geographic landscapes. This study's emphasis on energy production in agricultural contexts also brings to mind a parallel ongoing debate about the wisdom of using agricultural resources to produce agro/biofuels instead of food. Global hunger and in rural America might be compounded by the threats to farmland for natural gas and agrofuel production.

Extending Malin and DeMaster's work, Kulscar, Selfa and Bain's paper (this volume) builds on William Freudenburg's (2005) concepts of "privileged access" and "privileged accounts" to explore the ways that bioenergy development in rural America often proceeds without much challenge to that industry, despite its unsavory record of environmental harm, major tax and infrastructure burdens on local governments, and industry proponents' questionable promises of job creation. In the case studies presented here, industry proponents and local government officials were able to mobilize support for ethanol production by shaping public perceptions via privileged access to public resources (subsidies, tax breaks, feedstocks, water, and infrastructure) that allowed them to produce privileged accounts of the industry's impact on those communities, thus overshadowing other narratives and possible challengers. The ecological and social consequences of bioenergy are successfully portrayed as uniformly positive, resulting in the "non-problematicity" of environmental justice concerns. Thus, this paper creatively builds on classic scholarship from social scientists on what was once called "the mobilization of bias" and what Matthew Crenson (1972) called the "un-politics" of pollution and what EJ studies scholars today (including many writing in this volume) refer to as the problem of procedural inequity.

Otsuki's paper (this volume) expands this framework to the case of the post-Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant disaster in Japan. In 2014, the governments of two nearby rural towns agreed to accept interim storage facilities that would hold the contaminated materials from the Fukushima area. They appeared to accept this arrangement, in large part, because they felt that it was their responsibility after having benefitted from the economic impacts (e.g., local jobs) of the power plant for so many years. But a closer examination of the evidence reveals that these rural towns—and many others like them—made these decisions under coercive conditions that reflect an absence of procedural equity and local empowerment. The so-called Atomic Circle of industry, government, media, and scientists in Japan promotes acceptance of nuclear power in impoverished rural communities that has often resulted in what Malin and DeMaster have called a "devil's bargain" where economic development and national energy security are promised while public and ecological health are placed at great risk. Moreover, the distributional dimension of urban-rural environmental injustice is clear when we find that much of Japan's nuclear power is produced in rural spaces but is primarily consumed in urban centers where little ecological risk is incurred. This paper is a potent model of how a seemingly local and rural EJ struggle has extraordinary global and temporal ramifications, as radiation from Fukushima has spread far from Japan and will be present for the indefinite future.

Otsuki argues that while procedural equity is important, to a considerable extent, local people have had a seat at the table, but this tends to reproduce urban-rural inequalities and the peripheralization of these nuclearized communities. Instead, Otsuki contends that what is required is a re-imagination of that table and of stakeholder participation. In fact, in some cases, *non-participation and dissensus* rather than participation and consensus may be more effective for demonstrating the importance of reflection about the future of residents' homes, property, religious and cultural spaces and symbols, and memories. This paper reflects and builds on important research in political theory that examines the promises and pitfalls of inclusion, participation, and recognition. Otsuki offers an innovative and critical approach to the increasingly common call for "recognition" and procedural equity, which are frequently assimilationist and reformist, and therefore less likely to be transformative. Instead, Otsuki recognizes that the problem with the recognitional and procedural equity approaches is that they tend to embrace the status quo—which in this case is a nuclear society—when a transformative approach to environmental justice might envision and seek to bring into being a different society altogether. Perhaps the desire for inclusion is the problem, not the solution. Otsuki captures this need with prose and urgency befitting our current situation globally and the particularly acute context in Japan.

Speaking of transformative approaches to rural EJ struggles, Van Wagner's paper (this volume) examines the ways that land use law in Ontario constructs the rural as boundary spaces between the urban and the natural, which makes it difficult to articulate and perform transformative ecological relations among the human and more-than-human worlds. Writing against that dominant legal approach, Van Wagner defines rurality not as a fixed category or territorial space but as a site of contestation and complex interconnection between the social, the temporal, and the material more-than-human world. One of the questions I had in mind when reading this collection of papers is "what might *rural* environmental justice look like?" Van Wagner offers a response that involves engagement with the rural through new ways of living in, working with, and caring for the land via social inclusion and decolonization in the context of settler-colonial nations like Canada (and by extension, the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Israel, and others). This dual attention to indigenous-settler relations and human/more-than-human relations is refreshing and urgently needed.

Building on the politics of difference and its socioecological consequences, Pruitt and Sobczynski's paper (this volume) explores the ways in which typical environmental injustice and conservation narratives fail to capture the experiences of many rural low-income white communities facing environmental threats. They present the case of an industrial hog farm in the U.S. South to illustrate this phenomenon. I think this is a powerful argument that speaks to the fact that there has been a real lack of critical whiteness studies influence in EJ studies that pays attention to the exclusion of oppression of working class white communities. The work of scholars like Shannon Bell and Rebecca Scott has helped to address this gap, but there is much more to be done. Pruitt and Sobczynski note that the absence of the rural in EJ studies is concerning and surprising considering 1) that the infamous Cerrell Report commissioned by the California Waste Management Board stated that rural communities were ideal places for siting waste management facilities because those populations were less likely to offer resistance; 2) the Executive Order 12,898 requiring federal agencies to make environmental justice a part of their missions specifically mentioned the need to protect communities of color *and low-income populations* (i.e., working class and impoverished white communities); and 3) the USDA explicitly identifies rural populations as at risk for environmental and human health harms. But the EJ literature and movement have centered primarily on the *racial* aspects of environmental injustice, to the neglect of the ways that social class also functions to place low-income white communities in harm's way.

The authors find that opponents of a proposed CAFO/hog farm in the largely white, rural, and low-income community of Newtown County were unable to frame this as an environmental injustice precisely because of the absence of attention (in the literature and in movement politics) to both rurality and low-income white communities as targets of such injustice. While I agree with this argument, one would not want to conflate rurality with whiteness, since many foundational rural EJ battlegrounds have taken place in African American, Latino, Hispano, and Native American communities. Moreover, the fact that communities of color and indigenous communities may be more visible in EJ discourses has not exactly aided them and facilitated victories in the legal system. In fact, the courts have systematically denied access and justice in cases where communities of color have brought complaints and cases (Benford, 2005; Cole and Foster, 2000; Lombardi et al., 2015). The larger issue is one that rests outside of the legal definition of “EJ communities” (a rather puzzling legal and scholarly term given that these are communities marked by an *absence* of environmental justice) and rather should be an invitation to the EJ movement and scholars to take issues of exclusion, hierarchy, and injustice seriously wherever they manifest themselves. Otherwise, we run the risk of having white community members facing environmental injustice getting the impression that the government is providing unearned benefits to communities of color. The reality is that both people of color and low-income white communities are being excluded and that the government has little interest in reversing that trend. The state has historically and consistently maintained an interest in dividing communities of color from potential white allies. The logical problem with making any community—whether white, indigenous, people of color, or rural, etc.—more legible in the eyes of the law is that we should never assume that inclusion into the legal system will facilitate or even increase our chances of securing environmental justice. The assumption that inclusion might enable justice has been, in my view, one of the greatest shortcomings of the EJ movement and scholarship (including and especially much of my own work).

Like many other papers in this collection, Partridge's study (this volume) deftly illustrates how rurality itself is a social category that requires theorization and centering in EJ studies. In his paper, though, Partridge goes further and argues that the case of EJ struggles within indigenous communities in Ecuador's central Andes reflects a dominant cultural framework that links rurality and indigeneity in a manner that locates them both as outside of modernity and therefore devalues them separately and in combination. Moreover, that ideological work is combined with and supported by the material practices of historical dispossession and systemic political and economic exclusion of indigenous communities in Ecuador, facilitating their exposure to a range of environmental injustices. One policy solution to this “Indian problem” in Ecuador was to develop programs that would incorporate and assimilate indigenous peoples into the dominant national ideal. In the late twentieth century, that approach shifted away from integration to seeking a “plurinational” model of many nations—indigenous and non-indigenous—within Ecuador. Many observers have hailed this development as a progressive step forward, and, combined with Ecuador's 2008 Constitution that grants legal rights to nonhuman natures, that nation would seem to be at the forefront of countries taking serious steps to address environmental injustice. The reality is more complex and unsettling.

Documents like the Ecuadorian Constitution present an age-old dilemma: does the inclusion of the “other” transform that society or does it have the effect of reinforcing the power of the state through what Rod Ferguson calls “incorporating difference” (Ferguson, 2012)? President Rafael Correa has made it clear that no community within Ecuador—particularly indigenous communities—has the right to demand autonomy and free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) when it comes to the use of “natural resources” that are deemed “strategic” to the national interest (see Chapter 5, article 313 Ecuadorian Constitution). This is a damning but not surprising dynamic. For some critics, Correa appears to rule with an iron fist, but he only represents the kind of power that states necessarily embody and require. In fact, Chapter 4, article 57(7) of the Constitution makes this crystal clear: the state contends that “consultation” not “consent” is the only requirement for development projects on indigenous lands. This is particularly troublesome since FPIC is a cornerstone of the United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and Ecuador is a signatory to this agreement.

On the ground, we find that indigenous and campesino communities across Ecuador face repression from the state and extractive industries, with rampant surveillance, harassment, and imprisonment directed at activists who challenge them. Partridge analyzes a critically important response to these trends by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), which declared that “the Indian problem” was fundamentally a structural (and therefore national) challenge that was best understood as “the non-Indian problem” and that addressing this crisis would require the effort of all groups across society. This is truly generative and speaks to the histories of a multitude of similar national challenges that have been framed as “problems” or “questions” specific to a population experiencing domination (e.g, the Woman Question, the Jewish Question, the Negro Problem, the Palestinian Question, etc.). “The non-Indian problem” effectively inverts the “Indian problem” frame to redirect the focus on the source of the problem—those non-indigenous populations and social structures that produce and benefit from the systems of hierarchy and injustice in Ecuador, and is therefore useful for thinking through other EJ struggles across the globe. This paper has echoes of the work of a number of scholars (myself included) who have sought to complement the emphasis in EJ studies on environmental disadvantage with greater attention to environmental privilege (Gould and Lewis 2016; Park and Pellow, 2011) and of cultural critiques that have sought to recast problems of slavery as the problem of enslavement, and the problem of poverty as impoverishment. In each of these cases, we are asked to redirect our focus away from defining the problem as the existence of those at the bottom of the hierarchy and to instead challenge those who enjoy the benefits of a deeply unjust and unequal system. By extension, we are invited to challenge the system itself, rather than defining the problem as the lack of inclusion into that corrupt system. Again, I return to the problem of inclusion and procedural equity. Accordingly, perhaps one could say there is no “rural problem” so much as there is an “urban problem” that is inseparably built on and linked to rural injustices?

In Wing's paper (this volume) the authors characterize rural environmental injustice as a “*parasitic* relationship between urban and rural communities because urban populations obtain most of their food and energy from rural areas and return their wastes to rural areas.” I find this approach refreshing, honest, and helpful for getting at the roots of why environmental injustice is an *injustice*. I also appreciate the fact that the authors emphasize “environmental injustice” rather than environmental justice because they are focused on communities where there is an abundance of the former and an absence of the latter.

The authors explore these dynamics through an analysis of agricultural and energy production in rural areas across two examples: industrial hog operations in eastern North Carolina and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan (one of two papers in this volume examining Fukushima and one of two papers focusing on hog farming). The negative public health impacts of urban-rural environmental injustice result from human exposure to specific pollutants, the degradation of the built environment, limits on popular democracy, and ultimately, the suppression of the feedback between consumption and production that could lessen global environmental harm. The authors identify the following drivers of rural environmental injustice common to both cases: racism, classism, imperialism, local elitism, and globalization.

The authors point out that many of the laborers cleaning up Fukushima and decontaminating surrounding areas are from the *buraku* ethnic group—a stark example of workplace environmental injustice. CAFOs in eastern North Carolina also impact occupational health of workers—something both papers focus on, which is rare in EJ studies. The working conditions inside CAFOs in particular are often deplorable, something that is difficult to study because of numerous "Ag-gag" laws proliferating around the U.S., which criminalize the documentation of conditions inside industrial farm operations (in some cases labeling such actions as "terrorism"!). African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are more likely to live close to a CAFO than whites—a good example of distributional/spatial environmental injustice. These are excellent illustrations of what David Nibert calls "entangled oppressions"—the ways in which, for example, humans, nonhumans (i.e., livestock), and ecosystems are linked in layers of hierarchy and domination that tend to reinforce one another (Nibert, 2013). EJ activists in North Carolina and Japan have worked hard to make visible the realities of urban-rural environmental injustice. Activists in North Carolina built a model of a CAFO at the state capitol, and in Japan, activists brought Fukushima cattle to central Tokyo to dramatize the threats facing people and nonhuman animals. In both cases, these activists made legible the otherwise out of sight, out of mind contamination, pollution, and the relations of ruling that produce them from within the largely urban-based political power structures of the U.S. and Japan.

Even though the relationship between urban and rural areas with respect to environmental hazards versus environmental privilege is parasitic, the authors argue that, ultimately, urban-rural environmental injustice is disadvantageous for all members of society and degrades public health for all populations (a discussion that relates strongly to Ulrich Beck's [1995] idea of the risk society and the democratization of risk in which, despite initial uneven exposures, in the end we all face the dire threats of late modernity). Unfortunately, as this article and other studies have suggested, it is the very fact of the division or duality that separates rural from urban, people of color from whites, indigenous from settler, human from nonhuman and so on, that reinforces the existing arrangements and makes it so difficult to see and act upon our linked fates.

Stull et al. (this volume) present a new look at the intertwined racial and ecological harms of South Africa's apartheid system and its legacy. The authors urge us to understand that phenomenon as more than a racial, economic, and political system because it is also as one that deliberately made use of the environment to marginalize racially defined groups and to maintain white supremacy. The apartheid government of South Africa consciously employed policies and practices that used rural spaces to deny the majority of South Africans their political rights, relegating them to the least desirable and most unhealthy living spaces and labor markets, and securing their dependence on white-owned capital and corporations. The authors articulate a reversal in the usual way we think about environmental racism "as the environmental abuse of a racially-defined marginalized group." Instead, "environmental apartheid is the reverse logic of power. It instead commits environmental abuse in order to marginalize a racially defined group." This is an effective and creative framing for thinking about how environmental inequality formation operates distinctly across different geographic and cultural contexts. But what is surprising and disturbing about this study's revelations—in addition to the vast injustices committed against South Africa's nonwhite majority—is the fact that so many other places across the globe are sites where environmental apartheid has been practiced through the manipulation of both people and rural spaces—and the authors note this prominently. This study will surely inform and guide future comparative, historical research on environmental inequalities.

2. Concluding thoughts and questions

While this volume is exceptionally well conceived and fully delivers on its promises, I would like to offer a few more critical thoughts and pose additional questions for future consideration. One of the threads throughout this commentary has been the problems that are embedded in an EJ focus on procedural equity, inclusion, and recognition. My hesitation with this approach is that it either assumes that environmental justice might be more likely to be realized as a result of inclusion of aggrieved communities in state-based decision-making or that inclusion itself constitutes an environmental justice practice. Unfortunately, this perspective generally relies on an embrace not only of inclusion, but inclusion into a state-centric legal framework. The main message I take away from the work of scholars like David Theo Goldberg (2002), Charles Mills (1999), Carol Pateman (1988), Mick Smith (2011), and James Scott (2010a) is that if we are to take seriously the task of opposing authoritarianism, patriarchy, racism, and human dominance over nonhuman natures, then we must also accept that modern states were founded on sustaining those very hierarchies and practices, so any engagement with states with the aim of achieving environmental justice will likely yield limited results at best. Speaking to this issue from a distinct but relevant scholarly tradition, Grace Hong (2006) writes "women of color feminist practice identifies the state as a site of violence, not resolution …" In her call for the decolonization of Native peoples' lands, Hawai'ian Indigenous Studies scholar Hokulani Aikau urges us to "begin to imagine the impossible, *a wholely new governance system* that is not reliant on heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, or capitalism ….[she continues] … imagining the end of the state is seemingly impossible. But this is no reason to not try …" (Aikau, 2015). Accordingly, anarchist theory and politics may be one way of articulating ideas and practices that enable not so much rights and inclusion, but rather freedoms for all beings—human and nonhuman—specifically, the freedom *from* inclusion under the state's ambit. Otsuki's idea of non-participation comes closest to this approach in this volume. The EJ movement suffers from significant limitations on this note. While EJ activists and leaders have repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to challenge state and corporate policymaking through discourse, tactics and strategies, the movement is ultimately rooted in a state-centric model of social change. That is, activists generally seek to push the state and corporations to embrace some degree of EJ practices, while accepting the fundamental legitimacy of those institutions and systems of governance. Whatever we may think about this dilemma, I think it makes sense to proceed cautiously whenever and wherever state-centric approaches are proposed as a solution for environmental injustices.

The papers in this volume offer an excellent set of analyses of how key social categories of difference figure in and out of rural environmental justice politics, with particular attention to race, class, indigeneity, species, and the category of rurality. However, I was hoping for greater attention to the ways in which gender and sexuality might work in rural environmental (in)justice contexts, particularly, since, as Evans (2002) reminds us, rural "natural" spaces in the U.S. have historically been socially constructed not only through discourses that are racialized, but also in ways that are deeply masculinist, patriarchal, and heteronormative. Ecofeminism and feminist theory offer strong tools for making these connections. For example, scholars have explored the means through which EJ struggles at the scale of land and ecosystems, nonhuman animals, the human body, the household, community, social movement organizations, and corporations and states are all heavily inflected with gendered and sexualized meanings and consequences (Buckingham and Kulcur, 2010; Smith, 2005; Sze, 2006), so it would be exciting to see how these processes might play out in rural settings. Sandilands (2004) offers some insight into these possibilities when she writes about rural lesbian separatism in Oregon as "a locally specified form of *queer ecology*, a cultural-political-social analysis that interrogates the co-relations between the social organization of sexuality and ecology and is allied with both environmental justice and ecofeminism." She confronts and complicates the category of the rural and "nature" as traditionally heteronormative and demonstrates ways in which queer folk deliberately work to transform these sites into spaces that are inclusive of lesbian communities, thus contributing to a "queer environmental justice" (Sandilands, 2004: 123).

And while I found that the categories of species and more-than-human natures were invoked and present across the collection, these relations are generally cast as subjects that are acted upon and not seen as agentic. As recent scholarship from the fields of political ecology, object oriented ontology, and environmental humanities reveals, there is nothing that humans do that is entirely isolated from the influence and guidance of other species, ecosystems, and inanimate objects (Bennett, 2009; Freudenburg et al., 1995; Robbins, 2007). For example, petroleum is a highly agentic nonhuman actor that exerts enormous influence over global geopolitics and the global economy every day. Similarly, cattle are not just tools of the global and local human food systems: they also engage in (coerced) labor that co-creates a system of human/nonhuman relations that impacts everything from occupational safety and health to global climate change. I suggest that more-than-human natures and nonhuman objects like built environments can also collaborate in ecological protection and harm, and it would be invigorating to see future research take up that challenge in the area of rural EJ studies. That is a lesson and question for us all with respect to the many socioecological crises facing us, not the least of which is climate change (and Van Wagner's paper prompts this query as well): how can we work together *with* nonhuman natures as our allies and partners to promote and secure environmental justice and sustainability for all? I am certain that the emerging literature at the intersection of rural studies and environmental justice studies will be critical to pursuing answers to that and many more pressing questions.

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