

Envisioning Global Environmental Justice Studies

This chapter summarizes the main themes and arguments of the book and then transitions to some additional observations on the implications of *Visions of Global Environmental Justice* for global EJS.

STORYTELLING AND VISIONS OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The introduction to this book juxtaposed two experiences that occurred four years apart from one another. In 2015 I visited a farm plot that had been aeri-ally fumi-gated in the comunidad negra of Temuey on the Guapi River. On the motorboat trip back from the plot, the farmers explained how outsiders gained access to their region and strong-armed the locals into planting coca. In 2019, I was on a return trip in the same boat, with a new but related group of farmers who had taken over the plot. I wanted to see how things were going, to find out what happened to the farmers and their crops. However, a lull in our conversation presented an oppor-tunity for a change of topic. The men began telling stories about El Duende (the Troll) and La Tunda (a story about a supernatural female being that seduces young men). The conversation concluded when the men wondered why they did not hear these stories about these supernatural beings anymore.

And as suggested at the end of that description, there are multiple possible explanations to the question of what happened to El Duende and La Tunda. Per-haps this oral tradition is simply less popular than it once was. Maybe it is because people, especially newer generations, are less interested in such stories and are more interested in the entertainment provided by their smartphones. Or per-haps these stories are told less because many of the people who used to share in

this oral tradition have moved elsewhere, through personal choice, forcible displacement, or death. Or maybe the visions themselves, like human beings, have been displaced to burgeoning cities where they take on new identities to adapt to new circumstances.

I, the author of this book, believe all those possibilities to be true, but I do not feel it is important that you, the reader, necessarily agree with me. I, the storyteller, have introduced these visions and have speculated on the reasons for their disappearance, in the service of theorizing both the global and more-than-human dimensions of environmental justice.

Expanding upon the explanation provided in the introduction, the term *visions* in this book is multifaceted. It literally refers to the collection of supernatural entities that provide a narrative structure to the book. *Do these beings really exist? Do they have agency?* Those are questions of personal opinion. *Visions of Global Environmental Justice* has argued that these beings exist and have agency within the stories themselves. The tradition of sharing these accounts is an exercise in knowledge production and community building, one of many such exercises that are fundamental to comunidades negras mobilizing against environmental injustices.

Figuratively, *visions* alludes to the graphic-novel vignettes featured throughout the book. Some of these narratives have been illustrated, compelling you, the reader, to interpret the images on your own and then make sense of the images via the text that follows. The illustrations not only attract the eye, but also merge elements of the supernatural with lessons about environmental racism and justice. Although some of the illustrations convey a traditional historical timeline, others disrupt the conventional understanding of time by combining elements of the colonial past and present. In doing so, these illustrations demonstrate how comunidades negras conceptualize many environmental injustices they currently face as historical continuities connected to the legacies of slavery and the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in the Americas.

The term *visions* is also employed as a synonym for ontological perspectives, particularly in consideration of how contested terms—such as *environment*, *territory*, *biodiversity*, etc.—are comprehended differently by state institutions versus comunidades negras. The introduction mentions the challenges of ecological “incommensurability,” when there are no units of measurement common to ontologically distinct societies who value resources differently. Chapter 4 elaborates this discussion, highlighting the importance of global networks in the mobilization of environmental justice struggles. More specifically, the chapter highlights how the knowledge produced by local communities is made legible to state institutions through transnational agreements and organizations. The chapter also highlights how Indigenous and Afro-descendant ontological perspectives are materializing in the form of natural rights, which are subject to interpretation by state institutions and deserve critical attention from scholars and activists.

Finally, in hindsight, *visions* also refers to the active process of me, the author, “envisioning” *comunidades negras* as globalized EJ communities even though many residents have only recently become aware of the term *environmental justice*. In a similar vein, it also refers to the ongoing challenge of envisioning the expansion of EJS, which is not an event, but rather what Sze terms “a process and politics of meaning-making.”¹

The rest of this section will touch upon four key points from *Visions of Global Environmental Justice*:

1. The oral tradition of supernatural visions operates as a form of local biopolitics.
2. The necropolitical dimensions of environmental racism demarcate the expendability of Black and Brown bodies across rural and urban spaces.
3. The War on Drugs is a necropolitical ecology.
4. EJ communities span borders, scales, agencies, and ontologies.

#1) *The oral tradition of supernatural visions operates as a form of local biopolitics.* This was mostly discussed in chapters 1 and 4. These chapters describe “eco-monsters” (e.g., La Madremonte, La Madre de Agua, El Hojarasquín) that use their supernatural powers to defend nonhuman beings (mainly flora and fauna) against the violent intrusions of human beings. Eco-monsters also include visions such as El Duende and La Patasola not typically thought of as ecological guardians, but who occasionally perform that function. The “biopowers” of these visions are their respective abilities to control or manage life-forms. The function of these visions is not necessarily to protect the lives of all plants and animals from humans, but rather to protect the balance of the ecosystem from excessive human disruption.² In a Foucauldian sense, the stories of these visions operate as a form of discipline, which can have a panoptic effect.³ In other words, the stories are a way to convey the importance of respecting the plants and animals of the forest or the river, because you never know what eco-monster lurking in the shadows is watching. Taking a step further into Foucauldian theory, the oral tradition of sharing stories about visions could be considered a form of “governmentality” that predates the governmentality Foucault originally wrote about. In this analogy the community willingly governs itself, not according to the laws of the Republic of Colombia (here Foucault would refer to the laws of “the sovereign”), but according to the collective will of the community itself (here Foucault would refer to “modern bureaucratic forms of government” that eventually replaced the sovereign in Europe).⁴ While certainly not a perfect analogy because the internal governance of *comunidades negras* is not comparable to modern government bureaucracies, the basis for this comparison is the idea that power in the latter form of governance is de-centered. Furthermore, in participating in oral traditions and other practices that involve lessons about appropriate behaviors toward non/humans, community members play an active role in their self-governance. The collective will of

comunidades negras, in the idealized version of autonomous governance espoused by the PCN, is oriented toward the survival of “the territory,” which encompasses the entire ecological system, including non/humans.

#2) *The necropolitical dimensions of armed conflict are intertwined with environmental racism, demarcating the expendability of Black and Brown bodies across rural and urban spaces.* This argument is elaborated in chapters 1–3. Chapter 1 describes the necropolitics of Colombia’s decades-long armed conflict, in which Black and Brown bodies have been disproportionately targeted for death. The ghosts of those marked for death, as well as the visions that have been transformed by the violence (such as El Ayudado, formerly a civilian but now often described as a soldier who escapes death), are inscriptions of necropower in the rural landscape, the primary site of the armed conflict. “Necropolitics” is the rationalization of massacres and other forms of physical violence that forcibly displace peasants from their homes. In connection to EJS’s theorization of “racial capitalism”⁵ and “expendability,”⁶ Black and Brown bodies are less valuable within a white supremacist society, especially when their labor is not in demand. In the dual context of the Colombian armed conflict and the War on Drugs, the necropolitical explanation for the poisoning (i.e., aerial eradication) of comunidades negras was that it was a matter of national security (for the United States, Colombia, and the Americas) and that it was a form of environmental conservation (to deter the deforestation caused by coca cultivation). The massive displacement of Colombians from their rural communities to violent urban metropolises has generated a new kind of necropolitical space, the “necropolis.” Like modern-day ghettos in the United States, these spaces are disproportionately populated by Black and Brown bodies subject to both physical violence and the silent violence of pollution. The rapid growth of Colombia’s major cities, the necropolitan areas of these cities, has prompted Malthusian fears of overpopulation. The historical referent for those who do not belong, for those who have polluted the city both morally and physically, is the devil. The Christian devil is synonymous with sinful and pagan (non-Christian) behavior and therefore was the embodiment of the Spanish demonization of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. Conversely, the devil is a more complicated figure in the cosmology of comunidades negras, sometimes admired but almost always feared, and, for some displaced to the city of Cali, the embodiment of the drug cartels.

#3) *The War on Drugs is a necropolitical ecology.* This is the focus of chapter 3. This chapter expands on the original definition of “necropolitical ecology” as a conceptual means to reveal the extractivist, neocolonial relationship between a local Indigenous population and the assemblage of exploitative actors intertwined with the Ugandan state. This ecology is sustained by the surplus value extracted from land and resources, which facilitates the further annexation of territory.⁷ Chapter 3 explains how there are multiple necropolitical ecologies presently exploiting the land and resources of the southwestern Colombian Pacific region,

which include large-scale gold mining operations, palm oil plantations, and coca cultivation / cocaine paste production. These respective necropolitical ecologies are similarly composed of what Cavanagh and Himmelfarb term “an assemblage of political and economic actors”⁸ (government institutions, multinational corporations, paramilitary groups, emergent criminal bands, etc.) deterring peasants from subsisting on desirable lands. It is popular opinion among affected residents of *comunidades negras*, especially those affiliated with the PCN, to view the aerial eradication of coca as an intentional form of displacement and means to dispossess *comunidades negras* of their territories. I invented the Two-Headed Monster as a metaphor for the destruction caused by both the demand for cocaine and the prohibition of cocaine. Both heads of the monster factor into the necropolitical ecologies of the southwestern Pacific region (and globally) because the prohibition of illegal drugs, especially when rationalized as a form of national security, promotes forcible eradication strategies that criminalize populations in illicit crop-cultivating regions. Their lives become more expendable in the eyes of drug authorities because they are putting others’ lives in danger by virtue of the illegal economic activity (i.e., in the case of the FARC, their tax on coca cultivators raised funds to continue their insurgency against the Colombian state). This dynamic is prevalent not only in this predominately Afro-descendant- and Indigenous-populated corner of Colombia, but elsewhere in the world, especially the United States, where the criminalization of drug production and trafficking has disproportionately impacted Blacks and Latinos. Furthermore, this global-scale necropolitical ecology is self-sustaining because the War on Drugs is not a winnable war. Coca cultivation may disappear from one region, only to later reappear in the same region or simply shift to another location. The business of prohibition is a continual source of employment, with its own economic logic that seeks to continually expand operations or, in the case of combatting rebranded “narcoguerrillas,” to draw funding from new sources (counterterrorism funding after 9/11).⁹

#4) *EJ communities span political borders, geographic scales, and non/humans.* This is the overarching argument of chapter 4. The impetus for environmental justice at any scale is the community impacted by environmental racism. The refusal to settle for state-driven solutions and the drive to “make justice happen” is the common bond between different kinds of EJ movements, whether they refer to themselves as such (“environmental justice communities”) or not. While normally conceptualized within specific locales with specific political borders (e.g., city, county, state/province/department, or national), the messages of EJ movements typically move beyond those boundaries to be effective. The movements themselves are opportunities to build, strengthen, or expand the EJ community in question. However, because of the specific history of EJ movements, which emerged out of Civil Rights activism in the US South, EJS scholarship initially focused exclusively on urban EJ communities in the United States. Even though scholars have gradually expanded the analysis of EJ movements beyond

that original context, geographic scale remains an undertheorized dimension of EJS. The conceptualization of aerial eradication as a transnational form of environmental racism that has prompted the formation of a transnational EJ movement is a contribution to this lacuna in EJ scholarship. Likewise, the theorization of more-than-humans or non/human collectives or elements of the supernatural is also new terrain for EJS. Though the study or theorization of different kinds of beings, awarenesses, or agencies is becoming more popular across a variety of academic fields and disciplines, there is a strong argument that such work is both appropriate and important for EJS. This is particularly true for scholars who think about Indigenous communities as EJ communities whose ways of existing are a form of resistance in the face of climate change in the age of the Anthropocene.¹⁰ *Visions of Global Environmental Justice* has also sought to demonstrate that comunidades negras and other collectively titled Afro-descendant communities of the Americas, though often treated differently by state institutions as explained in chapter 4, are similarly worthy of EJS scholarship in this vein. In sum, though originally rooted in socio-ecological struggles in the US urban context, the emerging field of global EJS holds great potential to address the multi-scalar and more-than-human dimensions often overlooked in EJS scholarship.

ENVISIONING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE STUDIES

Before further delving into the potential of global EJS, however, it is important to acknowledge some simple guidelines that generally apply across EJS scholarship.

#1) EJS should always center the voices of the EJ movement. The further away any academic study strays from the voices of the social movement in question, the more likely it is to lose sight of the lessons of that struggle. To that point, many movements are outwardly identified by a social category of difference (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) but often are led by people championing justice for multiple forms of inequality. Centering the voices of EJ movements is one potential way to attend to Pellow's first pillar of critical EJS, which is to think about the intersectional dimensions of EJ.¹¹ Figure 19 places EJ movements in the center as the primary focus of EJS.

#2) EJS should abstain from definitively defining what justice looks like for EJ movements. This suggestion merely affirms a sentiment from Sze's *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger*, which is that *EJ movements* define what EJ looks like for their respective movements.¹² EJS scholars can theorize different aspects of EJ movements, support the knowledge production of EJ movements, and put the lessons of EJ movements in conversation with other literatures, but environmental justice is determined through the dialogue and actions of respective movements. Figure 19 makes a distinction between socio-environmental movements and EJS. The globe in this illustration is the field of EJS, holding such movements in focus. EJS works



FIGURE 19. Global environmental justice studies (illustrated by Jose E. Arboleda).

toward highlighting and theorizing socio-environmental movements, but these movements preexisted their mapping onto a globe (i.e., analysis in a field of study).

#3) EJS should actively work toward eroding the conceptual divide between nature and society, which also applies to the perception of environmental and social issues. Once again, this guideline is another affirmation of what EJ scholars such as Pellow and Sze have already stated¹³ but is worth repeating when thinking about how EJS scholarship can better theorize the ontological politics of environmental racism and justice. The misperception of nature or environment as something solely pertaining to certain kinds of ecological relations (i.e., usually with the minimal number of human beings or signifiers of human occupation) is itself a form of ontological violence produced by settler colonialism. For instance, when Spaniards first reached Alta California (now known as the US state of California),

they believed they were seeing lands untouched by human settlement.¹⁴ Their confusion stemmed from the fact that the multitude of Indigenous peoples living in California had transformed the landscape in many ways imperceptible to Europeans (e.g., vegetation cleared out of meadows to facilitate hunting opportunities),¹⁵ who associated human settlement with a more dramatic transformation of landscapes (e.g., buildings, land cleared for ranches or farms). One aspect of this ontological violence is that Euro-American settlers eventually imposed rules about what nature or environment is and what it is not, which facilitated the displacement of Indigenous peoples for the creation of national parks (i.e., for the preservation of “natural” spaces).¹⁶ It is the same ontological violence that hinders many mainstream environmentalists from perceiving urban environmental racism because urban spaces do not pertain to “nature” or “the environment.” In the concluding pages of *What Is Critical Environmental Justice*, Pellow argues for merging EJ with ecological justice because ecological justice more deeply engages human beings’ relationships with the nonhuman world.¹⁷ Perhaps EJS should attempt to redefine itself as a form of “socio-ecological justice” as a step toward further erasing both boundaries. Figure 19 places protesters asking “Stop the violence” alongside protesters asking to stop pollution: “*No más contaminación.*”

#4) To situate the knowledge production of EJS and as an affirmation of guideline #1, EJS scholars should be clear that they are not stating anything new about environmental justice that past/present/future EJ movements have not already stated. This guideline is meant to remind EJ scholars that, beyond engagement with EJ movements, their primary functions as scholars are to expose environmental racism, present the lessons of environmental movements, and challenge the hierarchies of credibility¹⁸ that marginalize the knowledge production of EJ communities. Figure 19 depicts arrows (i.e., flows) emanating from those demanding change. These flows are the lessons of socio-environmental movements, the bases for revolutions of thought and action.

#5) EJS must keep in mind that EJ movements’ thinking beyond state-based solutions also often implies thinking beyond the academy. Given the increasing use of the term *environmental justice* in popular discourses as well as the increase in EJ as a topic of scholarly inquiry, it is more important than ever to remember that not everyone talking about EJ is concerned with the ethics of EJ movements. This is particularly true in universities and other institutions of learning that draw from a wide range of funding sources (e.g., state budgets, federal budgets, military-funded grants, corporate-funded grants, etc.). For example, the US Environmental Protection Agency recently created the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights.¹⁹ This does not mean that the research funded by their grants, with “environmental justice” printed in the titles of publications from those grants, is necessarily in line with the objectives of the EJ movements those investigations may focus on. The flows of figure 19 extend beyond the globe itself (i.e., EJS) in acknowledgement that any academic field of study has such limitations.

Global environmental justice studies has the potential to engage the global scale of environmental racism and justice in some exciting novel ways, both theoretically and methodologically.

Beyond identifying ways to think about the global scale of environmental racism, which was specifically discussed in the introduction and has been discussed across other chapters of *Visions of Global Environmental Justice*, more attention should also be paid to the ways socioeconomic globalization facilitates global environmental racism. EJ scholars have an opportunity to elaborate on the ways that the consumption habits of the Global North compromise the sustainability of life on the planet, which is further exacerbated by the entire world becoming more connected (especially through social media) and more consumption oriented. To that point, climate change (with its affiliated disasters) and garbage patches in the ocean are forms of pollution that are not distributed equally across ecosystems. Furthermore, much more can be done to reveal the connections between extracitizenship (usually the domain of political ecologists), physical violence, and environmental racism. The same can be said of specific entities that top the list of the world's polluters, such as the US military, that provide EJ scholars an opportunity to illustrate the global intersections of environmental racism and physical violence through geospatial and quantitative methods.

Theorizing the globalization of EJ movements is a potential site of collaboration for EJS scholars conducting ethnographic research on EJ movements and legal scholars focused on the proceedings of EJ court cases. As *Visions of Global Environmental Justice* has attempted to demonstrate, EJ scholars should pay particular attention to how EJ communities leverage transnational agreements and assistance in such court cases. There are also numerous opportunities for EJ scholars to explore how EJ itself has become a globalized concept, translated differently across geo-ontological contexts.

Last, much work needs to be done identifying literatures that could fall under the rubric of global EJS, especially scholarship not explicitly identified as EJS. Apart from scholarship that deconstructs the nature-society divide, there is great need for investigation of the ramifications of natural rights. As Álvarez and Coolsaet argue for in their call to decolonize EJS, EJ scholars need to pay more attention to decolonial literature and scholarship of the Global South in general.²⁰ In particular, because of EJS's concern with centering the voices of EJ movements, literature on the pluriverse, the geopolitics of knowledge production, and ecologies of difference would resonate with global EJS.

In conclusion, I would like to share the words of someone I interviewed about the effects of aerial eradication on their community:

A recommendation for your thesis or your book, which is that you should document the poverty that exists here in the Pacific, but you should also show the potential that there is in flora and fauna . . . that for a few whims is being destroyed, because this biodiversity serves not just our community, but the entire world.