

**In your first book, *Noxious New York*, you argued that communities engaged in environmental justice struggles “used environmental justice as their new language and approach to old problems of race and urban poverty.” This makes us wonder how we should define environmental justice. Is it a resource that communities draw on in struggles against polluting industries? Is it a phrase we use to name particular kinds of political movement struggles? And what has been, and/or should be, the role of scholars of environmental justice in contributing to those struggles and creating that shared language?**

Environmental justice as a term has different meanings for diverse audiences. Social movement scholars (Pulido, Harrison) and philosophers (Schlosberg) have articulated what competing conceptions of justice mean, and some have argued that the concept has been neutered to mean merely participation/ representation in the policy arena. I take a capacious view of how peoples, organizations and social movements use the term. The broadness of the term explains why it has so much traction. At the same time, I do believe that definitions matter. So for me, my own favored conception of environmental justice is when the term is used as a way to critique and restructure existing power relations. Representation and participation, however important, are never enough.

So for me, the strength of the environmental justice concept is its flexibility and in how it links what seems like wildly different moments and movements that both precede and coexist with it: indigenous land rights, efforts to stop police and state violence and workers movements (i.e. farmworkers or industrial occupational health), to name a few justice-related movements that have made strong affiliations, or strategically reframed their already existing struggles within an environmental justice frame. You can see this in the Movement for Black Lives Platform in the Economic Justice section which says “While this platform is focused on domestic policies, we know that patriarchy, exploitative capitalism, militarism, and white supremacy know no borders. We stand in solidarity with our international family against the ravages of global capitalism and anti-Black racism, human-made climate change, war, and exploitation.”<sup>1</sup> Environmental justice is a key theme of the Economic Justice section of the platform, as discussed in the Restored Land Air Water Policy Brief.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the relationship of scholars to environmental justice, I believe that the scholar-activist hybrid is a central part of the environmental justice field, and that it’s important to distinguish between formal/ academic definitions of scholars and movement theorists. I don’t believe in a theory/ practice divide, or that scholars who generate theory are located only in the academy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://policy.m4bl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Restored-Land-Air-Water-Policy-Brief.pdf>

But, for those scholars based primarily in their professional lives in the academy, it's incumbent upon us to work closely with activists and community-based organizations and social movements and to be respectful in terms of knowledge production.

By that, I believe that when writing about environmental justice movements, the best practices are to co-write when possible, rather than taking the "individual" credit-taking approach in academia (or at the very least, co-generate research questions). At the same time, existing institutional structures look down upon that kind of work, which can be detrimental to the academic careers of women and women of color in particular. One way in which I think where academics have a unique role (perhaps) is our ability to write, connect, and disseminate certain histories, ideas, or concepts in a way that supports social movements. To give you an idea of what that might look like, my colleague, Lindsey Dillon and I just co-wrote a piece about police violence and asthma, and the intellectual genealogies of Black Lives Matters vis a vis anti-racist geography and post-colonial scholarship.

**So the fact that you're thinking about the environmental justice implications of police violence in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement suggests to us that the momentum of your work is very much generated from the political struggles of the moment. Struggles you witness, participate in, contribute to. We find this interesting in your work because you titled the introduction to *Noxious New York*, "Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger." What are the differences today, ten years later, between that moment of danger, and the one we find ourselves in today?**

I take that phrase from George Lipsitz's 2001 *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*, in which he asks: "What becomes of "national knowledge" in our age of globalization? If dramatic changes in technology, commerce, and social relations are undermining familiar connections between culture and place, what happens to legacies of learning that put the nation at the center of the study of history, culture, language, politics, and geography?" His question is a political and an epistemological one: where is "American" studies in the context of globalization which valorizes the free movement of capital and culture, at the same time that people and national boundaries (i.e. in anti-immigration policies and rhetoric ) is being policed ever more vigorously and violently.

These questions remain salient, and the challenges for social justice scholars remain even more intensified (witness the election year and Trumpism as a political force). Ten years ago, no one in the environmental justice movement foresaw that their efforts in fighting pollution in certain cities and neighborhoods would arguably accelerate displacement, what scholars call "environmental gentrification." The general thrust of the argument is that environmental clean-up makes particular neighborhoods more desirable for outsiders, who are often richer, and whiter than previous residents. That is not to say that environmental justice activists are the agent of their displacement- government policies and real estate development are the central factors in

increasing economic and spatial inequality. But, the cleaning up of previously polluted neighborhoods does do something, that environmental justice activists in the 1990s did not foresee. This displacement question is certainly true in New York, as well as in a number of cities. Another example of a “new” challenge, is in climate change and environmental justice. Ten years ago, not many people had heard of the Anthropocene. Now in environmental humanities and social science research, both concepts are much more present in the activism and the scholarship where they previously not well centralized.

The framework I used to analyze the particular struggles in *Noxious New York* was specifically in terms of the privatization of garbage and energy deregulation. That book situated local, and racial struggles within broader ideological debates. These debates remain central today: what is the role of community in relation to capital? What is the impact of neoliberalism on communities of color? These ideologies are only stronger, and more hegemonic (though, the IMF has just decided to announce that neoliberalism is actually not successful in what it aims to do). At the same time, social movements still resist prevailing cultural and economic discourses and social policies, whether it’s called neoliberal corporate capitalism, or market fundamentalism.

There *are* also concrete and discursive changes in the last ten years. One can see a broader acceptance of social movement discourses around environmental and social justice claims, whether from the standpoint of climate justice movements, or from Pope Francis’ Encyclical on the Environment. On the other hand, on the scientific front, the drumbeat of evidence on accelerating climate change is indeed grim. Intellectually, then, in terms of assessing the “moment of danger,” I am drawn always back to Antonio Gramsci’s “Pessimism of the intellect, Optimism of the Will,” and Jonathan Lear’s notion of “Radical Hope” in his discussion of Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow Nation. Lear, a philosopher, wrote about issues of ethics, cultural devastation and radical hope.

**Environmental justice scholarship finds a disciplinary home all over the academic map. Sociology, Geography, Black Studies, and English among many others. You situate your work in American studies, a discipline that George Lipsitz argues, in the book you reference above, has long been interested in knowledge from the ground up. What does it mean for you to do environmental justice within the discipline of American studies and as an American studies scholar? And what difference, if any, do you think the multi-disciplinarity of environmental justice research makes for work in the field?**

Growing up in Chinatown in New York City, I knew that place, race and community was strongly related, I just didn’t know how or why. At UC Berkeley, I was an English major who took a lot of Ethnic Studies Classes, and ended up (somewhat accidentally) in a Race, Poverty and the Environment Class taught by Carl Anthony (who is an African American architect and founder of Urban Habitat). After graduation, I was working as an organizer at the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance and found myself asking questions and wanting answers

that were not able to be asked or researched in the context of community organizing. For example, in many of the disputes about noxious facility siting, polluters or government agencies answered the “why here” question that activists asked with a one-word answer- *zoning*. In these accounts, zoning had no past, no history and no politics. That didn’t seem like a satisfying answer to me, but as an organizer, there was not time to read or think more (short answer: zoning has a very contentious and racist past). I ended up in an American Studies Program at New York University because it was focused on scholar-activism. I worked with a leading public intellectual, Andrew Ross, and went to graduate school with many people who had prior careers in prison justice, labor rights, indigenous cultural performance, arts curation, etc. Thus, for me, my research agenda was always a combination of personal, work, and academic experiences.

The immersion into American Studies was quite fortuitous. As I wrote in a recent piece, American Studies pedagogy is intimately related to projects of critical and Freirian radical pedagogy, through a focus on social movements, critical theory, and social transformation in response to racial, social, and other injustices. Much American Studies research has focused on social movements and in expanding the boundaries of knowledge production. There is a particular intellectual genealogy and praxis-oriented tradition that we draw on. In retrospect, it’s quite easy to see how each of my professional and personal experiences contributes to what I care about, how I research, and where I stand intellectually and politically (though these strands are not always easy to identify while one is living and learning).

I’m not alone in the field of American Studies in my obsession with border crossing- whether that border is geopolitical or epistemological- between campus/ community and between academic fields. Thus, the interdisciplinarity-transdisciplinarity and methodological freedoms that American Studies allows and encourages works well with my own intellectual approach. I take whatever intellectual or disciplinary tools are most appropriate for the particular research project I’m undertaking. Sometimes that’s a more discursive or culturally analytic approach to texts (broadly defined). Sometimes interviews and policy analysis are most appropriate. Capaciousness was, and remains my central dogma.

That said, I am heavily influenced by a few key disciplines I don’t practice explicitly, specifically environmental history and political ecology. Reading environmental histories or historical sociology informs my understanding of current trends. As an undergraduate, I had many formative intellectual and activist encounters. These include reading texts in my classes (Race, Poverty and Environment, Eco-feminism), taking foundational classes with leading scholars in ethnic studies, peace and conflict studies and with social movement scholars who studied anti-nuclear movements. At the same time, I came of intellectual age in the context of political organizing against the onslaught of anti-immigrant and anti-affirmative action propositions in CA in the early 1990s.

Because I work on environmental issues, I sometimes collaborate with environmental scientists and engineers. Reading history helps situate current debates, and my inherent suspicion of top-down authoritarianism, engineering and technical fixes. As I wrote in the conclusion to my recent book, another faith of mine, is in change, fluidity and humility in contrast to the “seeing like a state” optic discussed by James Scott’s book of the same name. He explores the Greek concept of *mêtis*- practical and cunning intelligence, which stands as an effective antidote to the natural and social failures of state power. The essence of *mêtis* is knowledge about when and how to apply rules of thumb to concrete situations.

In that vein, I have learned, and have much to learn from anti-racist and women of color feminist scholarship, such as African-American feminist geography and indigenous feminisms. Some of these cross in projects like the Black/Land Project, in the work of Eve Tuck, Mistinguette Smith, and Alison Guess who explore (in their words) “settler colonialism and the persistence of meaningful relationship to land for Indigenous peoples and Black peoples.” There is much important activism and theorizing around collective continuance and indigenous responses to climate change. Again, some of this work tracks the border-crossing that activists engage in, such as black, undocumented and Indigenous water justice activism after the mass lead poisonings in Flint Michigan, and between Flint and other communities of color who have long suffered from water injustice, such as in the Central Valley region of California.

In short, the more people I talk to, the more broadly I read, the more I learn about what I don’t know and need more to learn about in order to address my core intellectual questions, that are intimately shaped by my political values.

**Speaking of climate change, in your second book, *Fantasy Islands: Chinese Dreams and Ecological Fears in an Age of Climate Crisis*, you consider the eco-modernist discourses of Chinese urbanism through the lens of eco-desire, which you argue is a productive force in Chinese urbanism that creates neoliberal subjects unleashed by a capitalist machine peddling a kind of techno-utopian eco-desire as its climate change (and capitalist) friendly version of urban development. In it you examine, among a number of cases, the city of Dongtan, celebrated as a smart eco-city, but to you a city that presents not the antidote to the problems of chinese urbanism in the age of climate change, but its culmination. In some ways this book is a departure from your first book on environmental justice struggles in New York. You depart New York for Dongtan, depart explicitly environmental justice scholarship for work on ecological and Chinese urbanism, and you depart from the role of the scholar/activist for the role of a second generation Chinese migrant returning to China as a scholar (for the reader: Julie Sze’s family has a connection to Dongtan). Were you more drawn to this project as a way to think about climate change as an environmental justice issue or because of your family’s connection to the place? In other words, help us understand how you work as a scholar. How do you choose your projects? And what motivates you to make the choices you make about the work you do?**

I return to my previous answer. There is no separation or departure in my head, even if others find there to be. How I approach my various topics of research- whether humanities/ cultural analysis of “texts,” policy analyses/ social movements, spaces of power (urban/ rural), are all informed by each other. So the answer is not either/or. I was (and remain) deeply concerned about climate change as an environmental justice issue, and yes, my family’s connection to the place was the catalyst to dive into this particular project as a way to concretize my concern with how environmental solutions discourse masks more than it reveals.

To return to your very important question, you are right that this recent book doesn’t look like traditional environmental justice scholarship. The book focuses more on analyzing the top-down authoritarian approach, rather than a bottom-up account of community politics. Where it is similar to *Noxious New York* is that its focus is global city environmental politics. Again, the categories are only useful insofar as they illuminate, rather than obscure. So while I am an urbanist, engagement with justice struggles in the Central Valley showed me how the urban/ rural connections are central (i.e. Ruth Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag* on the rise of prisons in the region as a racial/ spatial fix in California is of course, foundational in that respect).

I choose research projects that I care about, or that come to me (five years of co-writing on CA environmental justice policy implementation was an outcome of founding and directing the Environmental Justice Project on campus). In the spirit of disclosure, I’ve also given up projects that I care about because they don’t go anywhere for me intellectually (and which I can’t offer anything). In terms of projects, I have very basic criteria: I have to care about the topic, enough to go all in for some extended period of time, and I have to believe that my approach can add something new to the topic that wouldn’t otherwise be done. I also have to believe, whether justified or not, that that work might have some impact which I cannot imagine or anticipate.

I am, however, a realist about what my skill set is, and what is needed in community-based environmental struggles. I’m not a health practitioner, or a quantitative scholar, yet many organizations and activists need and want scholars who can facilitate community-based participatory action research projects. My own role in relationship to activists and organizations also can change over time. There are many needs and roles to play in addressing the myriad social and environmental struggles in the world, and the same person can do different things, possibly at different times. Some of my role might be pedagogical, whether in the classroom, or between classroom and community. Again, being a teacher and a learner is a lifelong identity, with concrete actions attached to that identity: listening, incorporating perspectives, crafting assignments that matter etc.

**You are the founding director of the Environmental Justice Project at the John Muir Institute. Can you tell us a bit about the project, how it came to be, and what your role has**

**been in the work of the Project and how that work has influenced your research, community involvement, and teaching?**

The Environmental Justice Project began within the institutional context of the John Muir Institute of the Environment, and on a campus that heavily values the environmental sciences over all other ways of researching environmental issues. Although there are a number of renowned environmental historians, literary scholars, sociologists, geographers, and a strong history of interdisciplinary approaches to environmental issues in the past (i.e. a now defunct “Nature and Culture” program), our campus has a particularly contested history in relationship to industrial agriculture and economic development in California. Our nickname, is, after all, “the Aggies.” In this institutional and historical context, where much agricultural research is focused on developing commodity chains, there has not historically been a strong focus on the environmental and social justice issues, or from the humanities and humanistic social sciences. I was asked by the then Director of the Institute if I was interested in starting a project with a vision centered around environmental justice.

I knew that there were some faculty colleagues and student (graduate and undergraduate) interest in developing: an environmental justice action research agenda working with communities on environmental and social injustice issues in the Central Valley, as well as in articulating the value of the environmental humanities and social sciences. We got some preliminary funding to conduct a research inventory. Several collaborators and I published a series of articles focused on the relationship between social movement incorporation and environmental policy (climate, pesticide, water). One sample project I was proud of was in supporting a public component of Tracy Perkins’ Masters project on gender and environmental justice activism in the Central Valley, which led to an event, a website (<http://www.voicesfromthevalley.org>) and a curriculum (Perkins is now at Howard University).

What we tried to do in every project was foreground issues of environmental injustice, to support and inculcate a culture of engagement, create/ support a cadre of environmental justice scholars (undergraduate, graduate and faculty), and so on. The current director is Beth Rose Middleton, who works on CA Native Environmental issues, primarily in Northern regions. Although we work with different communities in varied parts of the state, there are core values that link EJ scholarship - a focus on praxis, social/ racial justice, and a deep appreciation of history and other modes of knowing and engaging in the world-including art and the humanities. While I can’t say that every effort I’ve been involved in connected to the EJP has been wholly successful, I know that my scholarship is enhanced and strengthened by my relationships with members of community organizations and groups that want to change, not reinforce existing power relations.

And some things do change for the better. Progressive students, and those engaged in social justice work are making claims on their education and curriculum. I am dismayed that it’s entirely possible to graduate in the environmental sciences at my University and not take any

classes that address justice concerns, or to engage with environmental history, literature, sociology, arts and drama, etc. I've had students go through their papers in environmental science classes, and realize that they were learning to be agents and managers of neoliberalism. It's possible to learn about Kettleman City in a policy class, and not learn about community struggles for justice, for example.

But I was most heartened by a student group called EJ communities for Underrepresented communities that recently sought to make their environmental policy and science learning related to struggles outside of campus, including in communities where more of these students are coming from (urban or rural). This group was over 70 strong, and at the kick-off event, I was impressed by their organization, discipline and learning. I told them simply, "thank you." There is a virtuous circle of teaching and learning that I believe in as a best practice and in the wisdom of others. My community involvement, research and teaching feed into one another, and feed outward, and back in again.

**Now that *Fantasy Islands* is finished, what direction is your research taking now? And given that your research and writing is always connected to your teaching and community engagement, where do you see this work going in the future?**

I've been working on how to situate sustainability research in relationship to social justice, in part because "sustainability" as a concept has exploded in recent years (in response to climate and environmental crises), yet the term is often uncritically used (I'm editing a volume on this topic). Sustainability can sometimes be used for pro-market ideologies. In many ways, this line of research is consistent with my early work on environmental justice movements which focused on how low-income and racialized populations engage with community and environmental struggles in distinct ways that center race, class and inequalities. I've also been very interested in climate justice struggles in distinct places and how they impact different peoples. As always, I'm interested in the relationship between political struggle and cultural production. I've been interested in toxicity, consumption and pollution. I retain a healthy sense of outrage at political, economic and social conditions that create harms for people, places (animals and ecosystems) and planet. Retaining a sense of outrage is useful insofar it keeps me from normalizing and accepting conditions that are historically and politically contingent. The moment I accept something horrific as a "matter of fact," is when I should just stop thinking and working.

My work tends to be located in a specific place but I'm always obsessed with how places are connected to each other and through time and history. So I remain centered on my core research interests (race gender and environment, environmental justice etc) but also aware of how much social movements and brave individuals are continuing to fight under deadly fire. I was recently at a panel with scholars at a range of points in their careers, where someone said, I've been working on the same topic/ question for his entire professional life. If those topics and questions are important, that's enough. So basically I have variations on a theme, which I'm fine with.



Certain actions- Berta Cáceres killing in Honduras, and the mass poisoning in Flint, outrage and sadden and distress me. Although I don't actively research these and many other examples of environmental injustices, my role is to support their struggles in all the ways I am able. One is to learn and teach about them and to honor the strength of activists. When some students despair about all they have learned, I return to the stories of these people- who, in the face of environmental destruction, continue to fight and share their histories, and ask for solidarity. Focusing on their lives and stories is one thing that we can do in these moments of danger, environmental and otherwise.