Water Wars in Environmental Justice Discourse: Place and Identity in the Age of Globalization

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ABSTRACT

My topic in this essay is water politics in environmental justice literature and discourse, considered within a global context and within the discourse of globalization. Looking at a handful of environmental writers—including Vandana Shiva, Leslie Marmon Silko, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Helena Maria Viramontes, and others, all of whom feature water politics in their work—I argue that although we ecocritical readers must address issues at the global level and account for globalization, these texts show that we must not lose sight of local, specific, and place-based issues in environmental justice. That is, these texts reveal a basic pattern regarding the importance of specific places or localities not only to water politics but to environmental justice discourse as a whole. Taken as a group these texts constitute a warning against the demands of simplistic globalism or globalization.

KEY WORDS

globalization
privatization
locality
water politics
environmental justice
place-based identity

This essay is part of my book manuscript on place and identity in American environmental literature. In my manuscript, I am arguing that the key issues in American literature of environmental justice are not just environmental racism and classism, as has been the focus in environmental justice discourse in general. However important these issues are, more important are the deep, complex relations between individuals or communities and the particular places or locations in which they live.[1] In this essay, my argument is couched in terms of water and globalization, but is otherwise analogous: in the face of the obvious power and ubiquitous process of globalization, the texts I am reading here show that specific places, or what we might call localism or regionalism, remain powerful forces. These texts, like the environmental justice groups that compose the movement, are fundamentally place-based.

In many ways, love for and defense of local places are more important to both writers and activists than the more abstract, ideological and global issues that have dominated environmental justice discourse. The dominating issues have been environmental racism (cf. Bullard 1993, Hofrichter 1993, Bullard 1994, and Cole/Foster) and, more importantly for my purposes here, issues involving the global dimensions of environmental justice and the "environmentalism of the poor" (cf. Harvey, Guha, Athanasiou and Westra/Lawson). To be sure, environmental racism has been crucial as an ideological issue in the history of the movement, and it has usually been articulated within local contexts. However, the problem I want to focus upon is the fact that since the later 1990s we have seen a wave of scholarship, and I have seen many ecocritics, who emphasize globalization and global contexts to the exclusion of local and regional

contexts. Guha, Athanasiou and Westra/Lawson, for example, all assume a simple global-level analysis, but an even better example here is David Harvey, who goes much further. His "What's Green and Makes the Environment Go Around?" is a typical example of this overemphasis on the global. Harvey's article is part of Jameson and Miyoshi's important collection, *The Cultures of Globalization*, and as usual it is an excellent piece overall, but in it Harvey demands that environmental justice activists must simply leave behind their local roots and adopt a universal, global discourse. In this essay, by contrast, I will argue that the most complex and satisfying environmental justice literature (for today, focusing on water issues) runs parallel to the local roots of contemporary American activism—they cannot be reduced to the global. They are irreducibly local and regional, even as they tend to include larger national, hemispheric and global contexts.

Following its modest beginnings with a handful of local groups in the States in the early 1980s, the environmental justice movement has mushroomed. This has particularly been the case since the watershed 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership summit, which formulated the "Principles of Environmental Justice," a manifesto which is still recognized worldwide as foundational. Since that time, the growth of the movement has been phenomenal. There are now 400 organizations dealing with environmental justice issues in North America alone; there are now twelve regional environmental justice networks and four environmental justice resource centers; in 1991 there was one book published on environmental justice, and now there are over 100 (*Community Coalition for Environmental Justice Newsletter* [Seattle], 2003). Meanwhile, there has been a tremendous expansion of international activism on issues we now gather under the rubric of environmental justice, and networks in the States have formed many international alliances with groups from all over the world. And so, in short, the movement is now a global movement, as of course it should be in the context of economic globalization. Since the attacks of 9/11, we have placed even more emphasis on global issues, for obvious reasons. And yet the movement is still composed of local groups. This basic tension between the local and the global, while productive in

some ways, poses many serious problems, and these problems form the larger context for my argument today.

Other environmental justice scholars have made this point about the original and continued localism of environmental justice groups and networks. In one of the most insightful and influential essays on the history of environmental justice, Giovanna Di Chiro observes,

> Ideas of nature, for environmental justice groups, are therefore tied closely to ideas of community, history, ethnic identity, and cultural survival, which include relationships to the land that express particular ways of life. The place—geographic, cultural and emotional—where humans and environment converge is embodied in the ideas and practices of "community." (318)

Di Chiro's comment on the movement would apply equally, if not more so, to environmental justice literature, and in this essay I will look at some of the literature before I return to this larger issue in conclusion. I am looking at water politics in a handful of recent environmental texts (by Silko, Vandana Shiva, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Viramontes). My reading will hasten to affirm the need for global-level analysis that includes neocolonialism and global capital itself. However, the texts I look at here also show that we cannot leave behind a fundamentally local (or at most regional) level of reading. In these texts' environmental justice approach to water issues, global issues do intrude—but love for and defense of particular places, people, living things and watersheds are most important in the formation of peoples' identities, in their cultures, and ultimately in their awareness of and action toward problems of environmental justice.

Water Wars, Globalism and Local Watersheds

Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution and Profit* (2002) is, to my mind, the best full-length study of the global implications of water politics as an environmental justice issue. Shiva, a physicist, activist and prolific writer and scholar from India, has

published numerous texts exploring various issues related to environmental justice. In this recent book, she turns her penetrating and comprehensive gaze to water.

As a writer, Vandana Shiva is not unlike Noam Chomsky, in that she is at once a scientist (a physicist), an activist (she is a leader in the International Forum on Globalization) and an amazingly prolific writer and scholar who is a national and global treasure. Also like Chomsky, in her writing she is able to synthesize a large amount of information into a clear and accessible (and radical) argument, an argument that is by turns both calmly analytical and passionate. Her focus, unlike Chomsky, who of course in his popular writing deals with US foreign policy and its propaganda machine, is environmental justice as a global issue. The backbone of her argument is almost always global. Her *Water Wars* (2002) is a good example of this; her 1997 *Biopiracy: the Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* is another good example (among others). Shiva's *Water Wars* shows that we cannot do without a global-level analysis of the process of corporate, World Bank/IMF/WTO/NAFTA-style privatization of water for profit and for the right to pollute. However, Shiva always focuses her analysis on particular places in their relation to this larger situation, and her analyses tend to narrate particular struggles. My point here is that Shiva effectively shows the need for a global analysis but also strikes a balance between her global-level analysis and a respect for particular places, communities, cultures, and bioregions; she always includes local and regional levels of environmental justice in her discussion. The structure of her book reflects this dialectic, in that each chapter is organized around a particular place, but the larger structure of the book, and its level of analysis, is comprehensive and global. Speaking in a worldwide context, Shiva writes,

> In most indigenous communities [worldwide], collective water rights and management were the key for water conservation and harvesting. By creating rules and limits on water use, collective water management ensured sustainability and equity. With the advent of globalization, however, community control of water is

> being eroded and private [i.e. corporate] exploitation of water is taking hold. (12)

Here Shiva is showing that the privatization or commodification of water is an environmental justice issue and that it lies at the heart of globalization and the global takeover of local water supplies. It is worth noting that at this level the classic Marxist analysis of commodification does indeed converge with an environmental analysis. However, Shiva moves to a different level by situating this process of privatization (published in 2002) within the context of post–9/11 global terrorism:

> This forced appropriation of resources from people is a form of terrorism—corporate terrorism. . . . destruction of water resources and of forest catchments and aquifers is a form of terrorism. Denying poor people access to water by privatizing water distribution or polluting wells and rivers is also terrorism. in the ecological context of water wars, terrorists are not just those hiding in the caves of Afghanistan. Some are hiding in corporate boardrooms and behind the free trade rules of the WTO, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). They are hiding behind the privatization conditionalities of the IMF and World Bank. (xiii-xiv)

One clear implication of this interesting passage is to factor in a global level of aggression over resources and outright resource wars, such as is currently in process in Iraq. Of particular interest in her book is the way Shiva articulates the interface between the global system of water appropriation and particular places. One of the most important of such interfaces is the tool used now for a global-level privatization of water, the doctrine of "prior appropriation," which was developed in the particular geographical and sociopolitical situation of the American West. For example, in the following passage, Shiva is discussing the global process of water appropriation:

> It was in the mining camps of the American West that the cowboy

> notion of private property and the rule of appropriation—*Qui prior est in tempore, potior est in jure* (He who is first in time is first in right) first emerged. The doctrine of prior appropriation established absolute rights to property, including the right to sell and trade water. . . . the current [global] push to privatize common water sources had its foundation in cowboy economics. (22–23)

Here Shiva recognizes the Western American origins of the current process of water privatization and suggests that globalization at the level of water politics is but one more form of Americanization. Given this particular history, grounded in the arid lands of the West, where the Indian Wars were conducted (in the late 19th century), it is no coincidence that American Indian writers have been in the forefront in dealing with water issues. And given western American Indian tribal nations' long tenure in the lands in which they continue to survive, it is also no coincidence that they have emphasized the local, place-based roots of particular communities. Many of the most celebrated and influential Native writers could be mentioned here, who feature water issues and dams in their writings, including D'Arcy McNickle (in *Wind From an Enemy Sky*), Louise Erdrich (in *Tracks*), and Linda Hogan (in *Solar Storms*). However, I wish to focus on two writers who are perhaps the best examples of what I am arguing: Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Dakota Sioux).

Silko's Localism in Global Context

An obvious literary example of a complex, dialectical relationship between the local and global levels is the famous recognition scene at the uranium mine in *Ceremony* (1977). In this scene Tayo, the novel's protagonist, sees the connection between the uranium mine on the Laguna reservation, where his own ceremonial process of identity recovery is peaking, and the vast, global system of nuclear weapons development, testing and military use (p. 245). In the scene itself, the emphasis is on the way he situates his own place-based identity recovery within a larger global context and the way he clearly

includes this larger level within his own particular Laguna cultural context. However, within the larger structure of the book, the real context remains fundamentally Laguna and the process of healing and identity recovery that is the heart of the ceremony can only be completed by his returning to the Laguna kiva and telling his story to the elders face-to-face. That is, however much the novel incorporates a larger global context, the novel is fundamentally tribally-specific (Laguna Pueblo) and place-specific (to the Laguna reservation and environs). And this larger context is overcoded or co-opted into the Laguna context, as a larger level of stories and ceremonies (in the Laguna sense of these terms) to add to the older, more basic level of Laguna culture, place and oral tradition (cf. Tarter, 2002).

Silko's next novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) is likewise organized around a particular place (Tucson), but it is not tribally specific and is much more global. And—although she does deal with water in *Ceremony*, in the context of drought in general and the poisoned ground and surface water from the mine—she deals much more directly and fully with water issues in her latest novels. *Almanac of the Dead* is thus an even better example of the way Silko's literary water politics dovetails with Shiva's global analysis. In the following example, she is writing from the perspective of Leah Blue, a Tucson real estate developer:

> People wanted to have water around them in the desert. . . . The water gimmick had really worked in Scottsdale and Tempe. A scattering of pisspot fountains and cesspool lakes evoked memories of Missouri or New York or wherever the dumb shits had come from. Leah wanted Venice to live up to its name. Market research had repeatedly found new arrivals in the desert were reassured by the splash of water. They are in the real estate business to make profits, not save wildlife or save the desert. . . . Her dream city plans revolve around water, lake after lake, and each of the custom-built neighborhoods linked by quaint waterways. The amount of water needed for such a grand scheme was astonishing. Leah could not deny that. (374–75)

This passage is revealing of Silko's basic approach in *Almanac of the Dead* as a whole. Here she is exposing and hanging out to dry the arrogant, imperial gaze of the neo-colonial capitalist, Leah, whose condescending perspective toward both people and environment is comparable to what Silko has elsewhere called the "destroyer" mentality. As a successful developer, Leah is quite adept at using the deep, unconscious anxieties of the new wave of settlers, whose dislocation and fear of the desert makes them easy prey for the imperial display and conspicuous consumption of water. Here the local and regional specifics of the place are carefully inter-articulated with the dynamics of capitalist development, without reducing them to the latter.

Similarly, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) diagnoses American eco-colonialism, and at the same time shows how this process of appropriation of water looked (and still looks) to American Indian peoples in the West. The following passage is a useful example, as we look through the perspective of the novel's protagonist, Indigo, just as she returns to her homeland from a long journey to the East Coast and Europe and sees the beginning work on Parker Dam:

> Up ahead on the river was a large earthwork—the dam to feed water to Los Angeles. Indigo was amazed at the changes all around; the river was trapped, and only a narrow stream, muddy red, flowed south. The river was stripped naked; all its willow and tamarisks were gone, its red clay banks scraped; and exposed piles of white skeletons of white cottonwood trees dotted the swaths of scraped red earth. . . . Parker wasn't actually a town; it was like a stagecoach station at the edge of the reservation. A barbed-wire fence marked the entrance to the reservation. (435).

Indigo's amazement here situates the dam project within her return to her home and the identity recovery this return directly implies. In particular, what she sees is her homeland being destroyed: "red clay" and "red earth"—Indian land—stripped, scraped, exposed, and taken over; what is left are white skeletons of white cottonwood trees, all for

the whites' water project. (This passage is also a subtle, casual reference for the cognoscenti to the title of Vine Deloria Jr.'s *Red Earth, White Lies*.) The passage neatly emphasizes the classic environmental justice connection between environmental and cultural destruction by juxtaposing the image of the destroyed river to the barbed-wire entrance to the reservation.

Like Shiva, Silko has a global level analysis of water that is recognizable as an environmental-justice form of discourse. And the global level is much stronger in her latest novels than in *Ceremony*, which only opens onto the global level near the end of the novel, and is framed by a Laguna-specific discursive context (the oral tradition). However, also like Shiva, Silko never loses sight of the local and regional in her portrayal of environmental justice issues in general and water issues in particular. Each of her major novels is organized around individuals within specific, real-life geographic and cultural places or locations (respectively, Laguna Pueblo, Tucson, and west-central Arizona).

In this respect Silko is not romanticizing or idealizing Indian communities or landscapes, as many of my colleagues tend to automatically suggest; in her fiction, her landscapes and people are all deeply disturbed, just as they are in actuality. A good example of this tendency is Krista Comer's reading of *Ceremony* in her celebrated *Landscapes of the New West*, which argues that Silko sidesteps environmental justice as an issue by portraying the Laguna reservation as a wilderness. This is an unfortunate misreading, considering the detail with which Silko elaborates the complexities of the oral tradition of the reservation, and connects it to particular places, in order to show how encultured, well-known and familiar the place is (not a wilderness at all, but rather home). More importantly for my purposes here, Comer ignores the many textual references to the way in which the reservation is polluted, over-hunted, fenced in, clear cut, blasted by the open-pit uranium mine, and poisoned by uranium tailing piles and tailing ponds. If Comer wants to criticize wilderness writers, fine, but *Ceremony*, like all of Silko's writing, is as far as could be from wilderness writing. Wilderness is a Euro-American and fundamentally colonial concept

and discourse, whereas Silko, writing out of a non-Western view of the land, is explicitly anti- and post-colonial. Colonialism, originating in the West, is of course now a global process, and it is the most important single environmental justice issue worldwide, once we see colonialism as part of the movement and power of global capital. But all of Silko's work deals centrally with the local particulars of the way these larger forces impact specific places and people—and the way people survive and resist these same global forces.

Another American Indian writer, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Dakota Sioux) is even more insistent on the importance of the local and place-specific in her portrayal of water as an environmental justice issue. Her work, even more than Silko's, shows why the local and place-specific will not go away, no matter how much the globalizing environmental justice theorists assume or demand it.

Cook-Lynn: Water, Localism and Nationalism

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is a Crow Creek Sioux writer and scholar who has published poetry, essays and novels while also editing the *Wicazo Sa Review* and working as a professor at Eastern Washington University for many years. She is now retired from academic life—although she still travels to conferences to give lectures—and is living and writing back home in central South Dakota on the Crow Creek Reservation. She has recently published *Anti-Indianism in Modern America: A Voice from Tatekeya's Earth* (2001), a powerfully-argued, traditionalist, and tribal-nationalist book of essays. In 1999 Cook-Lynn published a trilogy that includes her 1990 novel, *From the River's Edge*, and two new short novels, which as a whole is called *Aurelia: A Crow Creek Trilogy*. This tripartite novel is structured around the devastating effect upon the Sioux people and land, and specifically the Crow Creek tribe and land, of the massive Missouri River Basin Hydropower Project built in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. With five major, mainstem dams from Iowa and Nebraska through the Dakotas to Montana, this project dammed up more than 800 miles of the mighty Missouri River and inundated 550 square miles of treaty-protected Sioux land, much of

their best land, on eight reservations. The Midwest is powered by these dams, and white farmers have made unprecedented profits from their irrigation, but Indian income in the region fell to an all-time low and the Sioux lost much of the land which was central to their cultures and economies. One of the best treatments of this subject is by Phyllis Young (Standing Rock Lakota), who says that the Hydropower Project "definitely was genocidal" ("Beyond the Water Line," in Weaver, ed., 2001). The overall cultural effect on the Sioux, as we see it in the novel, has been devastating. The following passage comes from the first book of *Aurelia*; the passage is written from the perspective of the protagonist, John Tatekeya, whose name, as Cook-Lynn explains in *Anti-Indianism*, refers to the geography of the greater Sioux Nation.

> When he had been forced to move his cattle, his home and his outbuildings out of the way of the backwaters of the hydropower dam called Oahe, one of several such federally-funded dams forced upon the Missouri river, he felt great despair. He saw his mother's allotment, those of all her brothers and sisters, the Poor Chicken land, the Walker and Howe and Shields allotments, and many, many more disappear under the great body of water; thousands of acres of homelands all up and down the river which had nourished the people, now gone. . . . Cottonwoods, elms and ash trees which had stood for hundreds of years along the banks of the river turned white with decay as their roots were swamped. Nothing survived the onslaught. The medicinal roots and plants, the rich berry and plum bushes, the small animals and reptiles, were swept away, trivial sacrificial victims of modern progress. (48)

This passage is comparable in many ways to the passage on the Parker Dam cited above from *Gardens in the Dunes*, especially in its thoroughgoing connection of the destruction of land and river to the cultural destruction of the tribe. However, the key for my purposes is how different Cook-Lynn's work is in one major respect, namely, how specifically tribal and national Cook-Lynn's work is. Cook-Lynn is

very specific with respect to particular plants and animals, and family names and their lands. And by calling their lands by their official name—allotments—she calls attention to the way in which their ownership of those lands was determined by the federal policy known as allotment under the Dawes Act.

No other major contemporary novelist is as strict in terms of tribal traditionalism, or in terms of nationalism, as Cook-Lynn, and none other shows so clearly how for Native people in the States environmental justice issues cannot be reduced to global capital. So her textual perspective will always refuse to be completely globalized, and not only because the greater Sioux Nation and its tribes are place-based, but because of the distinct, historical treaty relationship her tribe and nation have with the US government. For example, the following passage comes from the second book of the trilogy:

> The people watched dust rise from the wheels of the slow-moving dump trucks moving away from the ruined river; huge orange trucks still moving rocks and earth and history and god's rare future as they might have done had they been in Greece at the building of the Acropolis. Miles and miles of treaty-protected Indian reservation land, like the stricken people who watched, seemed docile and expressionless. Everything was muted. Life and land and estate changed beyond tribal fears and extinction. . . . Aurelia had been among the watchers. The separation of the family and the destruction of the river, long a lifeline to the history of the people, accounted for the isolation felt not only by Aurelia but by all of them. (164–65).

Cook-Lynn is careful to include the phrase "treaty protected land" in her description of the destruction, a phrase which controls this passage conceptually and which emphasizes the specific historical relationship between the Sioux and the federal government over this landscape. This is a relationship founded on treaty rights and sovereignty, the abrogation of which is a question of national/cultural survival for the Sioux. Indeed, in her *Anti-Indianism* essays Cook-Lynn

explicitly argues in terms of Sioux nationalism, and directly relates her analysis to her fiction. This is a tribally specific, treaty-rights paradigm, and it only applies in this place; for Cook-Lynn only this specific history can make sense of the link between environmental destruction and cultural destruction occurring there. At the same time, the passage stresses how sacred this land is for the Dakota, and how this particular geography is central and irreplaceable for the cultural survival of the tribe. As the passage's conclusion shows, in the face of this destruction there can be no happy ending without the return and recovery of the land. Aurelia and the others can only watch, stunned by grief, despair and irreparable loss. This is exactly the position taken by Cook-Lynn as a novelist in the trilogy as a whole: all she can do is witness, in the sense of observe, recognize, and recount what has happened.

These passages are good examples of the way her narrative tone of voice is both painfully bitter and refreshingly honest. Cook-Lynn's tone is a big part of the reason why some other Native writers, who offer relatively happier or more spiritually uplifting endings in the face of such issues (e.g. Linda Hogan and Louise Erdrich) are much more popular with white audiences, including the ecocritics. Cook-Lynn's work always points in this way—a way that is difficult for many non-Indians to swallow—to the larger historical issues of stolen land, particularly land that is held sacred, with its culturally destructive, indeed genocidal consequences for Native American peoples. Historically, stolen land is the greatest Native environmental justice issue of all—the grandmother of all other EJ issues for American Indians.[2] To be sure, what Cook-Lynn is talking about is colonialism in terms of water resources, and that is clearly now a global process, as Shiva effectively shows. But Cook-Lynn's work also shows how irreducibly specific this issue is because of the treaty rights involved and because of how foundational—i.e. sacred, as they say—to their culture this particular geography remains to the Sioux. Looking at water as an environmental justice issue in this context, there is no escaping the primary importance of the characters' identities in relation to that specific place. That is why Cook-Lynn's novel focuses on a handful of individual characters and explores the impact of the river's

destruction upon them.

Conclusion: Locality, Environmental Justice, and Globalism

Although for obvious reasons having to do with long term tenure in place, American Indian writers such as Silko and Cook-Lynn are important for revealing the importance of place-specificity for environmental justice, but other American environmental justice writers from other backgrounds make this point as well. Take for example the Chicano writer Helena Maria Viramontes' novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, an alternately realistic and lyrical novel depicting the harsh and toxic conditions endured by Mexican-American migrant workers in the back-breaking fields of California in the 1960s. In the following passage, Petra, the mother of the protagonist, Estrella, speaks in response to her daughter's paranoia (which is well-justified) about being picked up and taken to Mexico by *La Migra*—the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Given the reality upon which her fear is based, Estrella has to be scared, even though they are American citizens who have lived and worked in America their whole lives. Estrella is paranoid because, simply based on their appearance and skin color, they are automatically read by *La Migra*—and by white Americans in general—as illegal aliens. So Petra, who is the most authoritative voice in this novel, deliberately responds,

> Don't run scared. You stay there and look them in the eye. Don't let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they'll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans [of the Border Patrol], you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them. . . . Tell them *que tienes una madre aqui* [that you have a mother right here]. You are not an orphan, and she pointed a red finger to the earth, *Aqui* [right here]. (63)

With power and rhetorical precision, here Petra is telling Estrella that they are indeed American, even though the Anglos don't recognize or

respect this fact—and that they have the proof in their birth certificates, which she keeps hidden for safekeeping under her statue of Jesus (hence the title). However, the deeper point is more place-specific than that: they have a mother *Aqui*—Spanish for here, or, in this kind of context, right here—meaning these particular fields in California. This is the place where they have been working and suffering in the heat and toxicity for slave wages their whole lives, and where they have not only legal rights of citizenship but an investment of tears and sweat and blood which feeds the whites and drives the California economy. *Aqui* also refers to that region, southern and central California, where their people have been since the 16th Century, three hundred years before the Anglos came and took the land by force. In that land they are "under the feet of Jesus" in the same sense that their documents are under the feet of the statue of Jesus—protected, grounded, kept from scattering. Viramontes' book is indeed about the hard labor, racial discrimination and toxic hazards suffered by Mexican-American migrant laborers, which is why a handful of critics have recognized that this book deals centrally with questions of environmental justice, but this passage shows how emphatically place-based Viramontes' take on such issues remains. Only by including such a place-based connection to the environmental racism and toxic hazards in this book can we really make sense of the novel as a whole, which is a coming-of-age novel about Estrella's identity as a young Chicano (i.e Mexican-American) woman.

To take briefly one more example: another major American novelist, perhaps our greatest living writer, Toni Morrison, must be mentioned in this context. Both *Beloved* (1988) and *Paradise* (1999) feature protagonists and entire Black American communities who are victimized by racist practices that are in turn situated within an American discourse that is clearly marked as environmentally-racist—but at the same time both novels are about more than that: they are also about history, identity, and landscape, among other things, and in all these respects the novels are deeply place-based. The protagonist of *Beloved*, Sethe, is an escaped slave who has fled north from Kentucky over the Ohio River to the outskirts of Cincinnati, where,

early in the novel, she resolves never to go back to the plantation in Kentucky and never to uproot again to anywhere. She will take her stand and dig into that particular place at all costs—and as we see in the rest of the novel, the costs are both high and worth it. Likewise, *Paradise* tells the story of an entire small Black community which picks up and heads west to the Oklahoma panhandle in the early 20th Century. The people of the town collectively resolve to dig in there, in their new town, which they name Paradise, and they will not be moved for any reason, even though their town is—ironically, given its name—disfigured from within by its own virulent combination of patriarchy, Christianity, xenophobia and environmental racism (the latter works against those people, especially women, who are "lighter" than themselves). I am suggesting that Morrison's novels deal squarely with environmental justice issues (in the form of discourses and practices of environmental racism) and yet show that the deeper environmental issues have to do with questions of the relations between peoples' identities and particular, historically-constructed places. My book manuscript deals with Morrison in a full-length chapter, but constraints of space keep me from saying more here.

Let me return by way of conclusion to the point I made earlier about the recent and current theoretical overemphasis on the global context. This type of discourse, I would suggest, is driven by global corporate capitalism itself and the transnational media, and it is also strongly presumed within the culture and discourse of Western academia. American academics fall into the trap of simple globalism far too easily, driven both by universities' desires to globalize their discourses and economies, and by the exigencies of the US' emerging, unstable, and disturbing post–9/11 reaction. However, an environmental justice analysis of water, just as many other ways of discussing environmental justice—at least as perceived by, among others, Shiva, Silko and Cook-Lynn—is as much local and regional as it is global. Indeed, it is quite possibly more so. The same has been true for the activists, since the beginning of the movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and it remains so now (cf. Bullard 1993 and 1994, Hofrichter 1993 and 2000, and Di Chiro). In activists' writings and in

the scholarship on the movement, it is clear that what really motivates activists are desires to love, protect and defend family members, neighborhoods, and particular communities or places—all the particulars, not some abstract global generalities.

Of course we cannot separate the two levels of analysis, as is intuitively obvious, but equally obvious (to my academic audience at least, as well as to consumers of corporate mass media), discursively we operate in the context of a heavy emphasis on globality and globalization. I am arguing that it is easily possible to go too far in our globalist discourses, and that we do so far too much. We do so in the deep structure, discourse, curricula of and advertising for the academic humanities, to speak only of my field; but this is also true of many other departments and divisions—and we ecocritics are following this tendency. We even see many of those using environmental justice discourse doing this, too. A typical example, among others, of the latter tendency is the brilliant, prolific and influential social geographer and environmental theorist David Harvey. He strenuously argues that the local environmental justice movements, which he disparagingly calls "militant particularisms," absolutely must leave behind their localism and adopt an abstract, transcendental, universal discourse:

> At this juncture, therefore, all of those militant particularist movements around the world that loosely come under the umbrella of environmental justice and the environmentalism of the poor are faced with a critical choice. They can either ignore the contradictions, remain with the confines of their own particularist militancies—fighting an incinerator here, a toxic waste dump there, a World Bank dam project somewhere else, and commercial logging in yet another place—or they can treat the contradictions as a more fecund nexus to create a transcendent and universal politics. If they take the latter path, they have to find a discourse of universality and generality that unites the emancipatory quest for social justice with a strong recognition that social justice is impossible without environmental justice (and vice versa). But any such discourse has to transcend the narrow solidarities and

> particular affinities shaped in particular places—the preferred milieu of most grassroots environmental activism—and adopt a politics of abstraction capable of reaching out across space, across the multiple environmental and social conditions that constitute the geography of difference in a contemporary world that capitalism has intensely shaped to its own purposes over the past two hundred years. (351)

Of course it is true that in the last analysis we are talking about capitalism itself, but in this passage Harvey just doesn't get it. He seems to have no idea what real people—activists, artists, writers, and scholars—have been saying is most important to them. Perhaps unintentionally, he disrespects the activists and writers themselves by insisting that they forget their local origins and affiliations, and assimilate to his abstract global theory. His absolutist, either/or argument is alarming in the same way as Fredric Jameson's argument is alarming in his classic *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), namely, that in resistance to postmodern capital we have to envision and create a grandiose new system that is bigger than capitalism itself. Harvey is a good writer and I am generally grateful for his excellent scholarship, but on this particular point he gets carried away by theory and has lost touch with both real activists in specific places and the best writers. Like most of the activists, at least in the States, all the texts I have dealt with here would calmly but categorically refuse Harvey's imperative to uproot themselves theoretically and adopt his global-level analysis. From the writers' and activists' perspectives, Harvey's theorizing sounds disturbingly like the general imperatives to globalize economically and culturally that come from corporate capital itself.

Like the most complex, rich, and satisfying environmental justice writers, environmental justice activists have always been locally-based, as even Harvey has to acknowledge here, and they have tended to prefer coalition politics—i.e. to retain their local group identities and simply form alliances in regional coalitions. In practice, since the earliest days of the movement (in Love Canal, New York and Warren

County, North Carolina) they have been grounded in specific places. Since then, both in the States and abroad, they have only formed into regional coalitions and alliances of specific groups, such as (to speak of the US case) SOC, the Southern Organizing Council, and perhaps the most dynamic and effective coalition, SNEEJ, the Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice (cf. Bullard, Hofrichter, Di Chiro, Szasz, Cole/Foster, and Weaver). Where I live, in the Pacific Northwest, we have recently formed NEJA, the Northwest Environmental Justice Alliance. NEJA is the product of a process taking several years, but it was formalized in late 2002. The point is, all along we have been self-consciously following the SNEEJ paradigm, led by local groups such as Seattle's Community Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ), Portland's Environmental Justice Action Group (EJAG) and Eugene's Coalition Against Environmental Racism (CAER).

In actual practice, the paradigm is not global, but rather a set of networks and coalitions, which at the outer level is global, but which is actually composed of voluntary associations of *local groups in regional coalitions*, which in turn have contacts with other regional networks and international organizations. This is not parochial NIMBYism; of course we are linking up with groups and networks worldwide, but we basically remain local groups in regional coalitions, and there are good reasons why—primary among which, I would suggest, is the importance of specific places to individual, communal, and bioregional identities. As Robert Bullard, the leading scholar of the environmental justice movement, argued in his presentation at the Coalition Against Environmental Racism (CAER) Conference in Oregon in January 2000, among activists there will be deep resistance to even national-level alliances, much less global ones. This is the case because, as he told a group of us in the hall afterwards, "from a historical perspective, that's just not who we are." For Bullard it was also a question of basic identity, and there was general agreement among us: in a basic way related to our local origins, we resist homogenization to the global—both that of capitalism itself, and that of the globalizing academic theoreticians. We are place based, and our

positive vision is to love, defend and continue to build our own communities.

Of course, in the last analysis, given obvious, factual global processes such as global warming, economic globalization (led by organizations such as the WTO, IMF/World Bank, and the G–8 governments), global terrorism, and global-level resource wars (now driven by the American military in places like Iraq), we have no choice but to embrace and engage a global analysis. However, the literature of environmental justice such as I am studying will steadily insist on the equal or even primary importance of particular places, place-based communities, and place-based environmental awareness and activism.

And so Harvey, who I bring up because he is typical of both universalizing academic discourse and many environmentally-oriented scholars and critics that have recently discovered environmental justice, has a point about the importance of global capital—but in his insistent, stratospheric, ivory-tower theorizing he emphasizes too much the global dimensions of environmental justice. By contrast, I would stress the importance of identity to environmental justice, and the importance of place to identity, and the importance of local ecological/cultural knowledge. (The work of the ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan, such as in *Cultures of Habitat*, is another fine example of this strain of environmental justice discourse.) One important implication of my argument is the deep similarity or alliance point between place-based environmental justice discourse and another group of place-based writers such as Wendell Berry, Scott Russell Sanders and Gary Snyder, who do not deal with environmental justice as such but whose recent work revolves around, respectively, staying put, digging in and reinhabitation. We are coming from a very similar place, so to speak, whether we call it bioregionalism, reinhabitation or place-based environmental justice discourse.

Within the discursive context of ecocriticism, this means that we can agree with Buell's recent, landmark argument:

> Literature and environment studies must reckon more fully with the interdependence between urban and outback landscapes, and

> the traditions of imaging them, if they are to become something more than a transient fashion. Although their reach in principle extends to any literary transaction between human imagination and the natural world, in practice they have concentrated (my own work included) on "natural" environment rather than environment more inclusively, and taken as their special province outdoor genres like nature writing, pastoral poetry, and wilderness romance . . . No treatment of environmental imagination can claim to be comprehensive without taking account of the full range of historic landscapes, landscape genres, and environmental(ist) discourses. (8)

If we can agree with Buell, as I think we should, then we have to deal with environmental justice in a global analysis; but let us not lose touch with environmental justice activism or literature itself. Paying attention to the writers and activists—not to mention our deeper emotional affiliations—we should also refuse to underestimate the importance of place-based identities, communities and historical-ecological knowledges.

NOTES

[1] The major texts I study in my manuscript include Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Helena Maria Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and her latest novels, *Almanac of the Dead* and *Gardens in the Dunes*, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* and a selection of his latest fiction, and a handful of poems, stories and nonfiction by Sandra Steingraber, Alice Walker, Simon Ortiz, Edward Abbey, Winona LaDuke, Gary Paul Nabhan, Jamaica Kincaid and others.

[2] See Jace Weaver's collection, *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice*, for a good overview of the issues involved; see also Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*; the best historical study of water issues for American Indian people is Daniel McCool's *Native Waters*, which shows how distinct and particular each tribal nation's historical, legal, and treaty-based relationship

has been and remains, at least in the West.

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