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Expendable Bodies: Examining the Connection Between Ecoracism and Embodied Toxicity to Advance Eco-Social Justice Activism

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Abstract

Although current literature in the environmental humanities establishes the existence of ecoracism and embodied toxicity, the discourse does not explicitly identify the connection between these two phenomena. This research paper argues that ecoracism, as seen in instances such as the violation of indigenous rights experienced by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe or the infringement of corporations on the sacred land of Maunakea, creates expendable bodies that are either invisible or negligible to the public. In this system, the suffering of the oppressed groups similarly goes unseen. This process can be specifically traced to instances of embodied toxicity, in which the contamination of communal land, water, or air with toxic waste is ignored by lawmakers. This research proposes a new framework for discussing toxic pollution by linking the creation of expendable bodies under ecoracism to the normalization of embodied toxicity. Further, upon examining contributions from prominent scholars of eco-social justice activism, this work illustrates the ways in which this new lens can be applied in order to advocate for those who suffer from embodied toxicity.

Author's Note

I became interested in this topic after reading "Denormalizing Embodied Toxicity" by Julie Sze, which I cite in this piece. This reading, paired with my studies in the environmental humanities, prompted me to examine the systems that normalize embodied toxicity. Through observation, I found that issues of ecoracism and embodied toxicity are often underrepresented in the media, in part due to the inability of these longstanding issues to fit into the confines of a traditional media cycle. Thus, I hope this paper can analyze the connections between ecoracism and embodied

toxicity to allow for more effective advocacy on behalf of the affected communities.

Keywords

Ecoracism, embodied toxicity, eco-social justice, toxic contamination, environmental humanities, activism

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2016, members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe organized to oppose the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (Million, 2018). Although Native communities have continuously resisted the construction of pipelines and other structures on sacred Native land in the past, this specific movement prompted much wider public attention and support from across the United States. However, this hard-won publicity was not enough to convince U.S. lawmakers of the Lakota people's claim to the land and water in the region (Million, 2018). As the construction of the pipeline continued, the stakeholders reinforced the time-tested hierarchy in which White Western culture usurps that of Native peoples. The push to construct the pipeline is a case of ecoracism, or environmental discrimination against minoritized groups. In this system of oppression, groups suffer from environmental degradation because their cultural values are deemed lesser than the monetary interests of the oppressors. In the decision to proceed with the pipeline, the culture of the Lakota people was sidelined and deemed unimportant.

Across the country from Standing Rock, the people of Kettleman City, California have been suffering from adverse health effects for over a decade because one of the largest hazardous waste facilities in the United States

is located nearby. This issue only became of interest to the State of California in 2007, when research discovered that infants in the communities surrounding the facilities were more likely to be born with cleft palates. Unlike in Standing Rock, the struggle of the mostly Latinx farming community in Kettleman City to effect change for themselves and their children has never garnered national attention. While discussing the case of Kettleman, Julie Sze refers to her concept of embodied toxicity—the adverse health effects suffered by populations due to environmental degradation—to draw connections between the cases in which the human body is contaminated by toxic chemicals (Sze, 2018, p. 107).

This paper argues that the ecoracist practices against the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the embodied toxicity in Kettleman City both exemplify how the two phenomena progress by way of expendable bodies. The cultural hierarchy that is established through the systems of ecoracism creates bodies that are viewed by popular society as expendable. This discursive framework normalizes the embodied toxicity experienced by marginalized populations. By applying new frameworks, this paper examines the pathways forward for affected groups and activists as they attempt to construe to lawmakers and the public a suffering that is uniquely invisible.

II. ECORACISM AND THE CREATION OF EXPENDABLE BODIES

In the Lakota tradition, Mni Sose, known as the Missouri River, is a life force. Not only does it provide sustenance for nature and people, but, “according to Ella Deloria in *Speaking of Indians*, the ‘ultimate aim’ of Lakota life is being ‘a good relative’” (Howe & Young, 2019, p. 56). In their struggle to protect this area, protesters against the Dakota Access Pipeline had to alter their rhetoric to fit their audience. As they attempted to present their case to a White majority, the Lakota people argued for the rights to the water—a pattern of logic that fits within an accepted Western discourse on ownership.¹

¹ Here, I use the word “Western” to refer to the culture derived from Europe that has traditionally come to be widely accepted as the mainstream in the United States. I recognize that by employing a “West vs. Rest” discourse, I am also relying on a set of assumptions that has been harmful to many cultures. I hope to use this discourse to challenge the shortsightedness of Western society and the gatekeeping that exists within the type of language it uses and the ideas on which it

However, their true goal was much deeper than what could be expressed through this framework; they protested not in the hope of retaining resources for the sake of personal gain, but to be good relatives to Mni Sose, as it had always been to them.

This effort culminated in the movement known as Standing Rock, where the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota peoples came together, standing firm to protect the land by forming encampments that eventually grew larger than a small town (Howe & Young, 2019). Community members worked together to provide sanitation, food, housing, health care, schooling, and other necessities throughout the encampments, uniting to weather the stresses of the environment. Not only were the protestors strong in their conviction to protect their relative, but they were acutely aware of the consequences should their mission fail to succeed. As they believed, “it is prophecy. A great Black Snake, Zuzeca Sapa, will spread itself across the land bringing destruction to the land, the water, and the people” (Estes & Dhillon, 2019, p. 1). The Black Snake posits what ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway calls a “speculative fabulation,” as it crafts a narrative that allows the people to more thoughtfully interact with nature and rally around its protection (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). A speculative fabulation such as this one warns of real outcomes: if the Dakota Access Pipeline were to burst, it would contaminate the drinking water of millions of people (Estes & Dhillon, 2019).

Given this cultural history, the eventual construction of the pipeline was devastating to the Native population. As Professor Dian Million bluntly states, “the subsequent drilling beneath the Missouri River (at Lake Oahe) was an act of rape, a violence that ignored Standing Rock’s long-embodied sovereignty in that Lakota place” (Million, 2018, p. 20). The sheer magnitude of the police force deployed against the protestors made clear the government’s goal to push the project through and “finish the job” without consideration of the Lakota people or their claim to sacred land (Million, 2018, p. 20).

In the case of Standing Rock, the message from lawmakers to Native peoples is evident: Your culture does not matter. A decision like this one reverberates throughout a society, effectively acting as an earthquake

places the most importance, namely capitalism and the constant quest to grow individual affluence and power.

that forces strata to resettle accordingly. The corresponding cultural hierarchy is thus further solidified, more deeply embedding norms that dictate who matters and who does not.

The U.S. government is now slated to coordinate development in another Native space, this time in Hawaii. Maunakea is quite possibly the most sacred place in the Hawaiian islands to Kānaka Maoli, or Native Hawaiians.² The giant dormant volcano is the highest point in all of Hawaii, and figures prominently in ancient Hawaiian legends. The mountain is now threatened by the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). Supporters of the telescope tout the importance of new scientific discoveries, but the Native Hawaiian population argues that the construction will defile the sacred site.

In Hawaiian creation stories, the Earth Mother and the Sky Father created the islands, beginning with the island of Hawai'i, on which Maunakea is the highest point. According to these traditional stories, the mountain "is considered to be first born, and is held in high esteem" (Hitt, 2019). Moreover, because this site was the first-born, it holds significance as the *piko* of the island, or the center of the beginning (Hitt, 2019). The sacred site reappears in many other texts, most notably in *mele hānau*, or birth chants, which explicitly establish a connection between the newborn Native chiefs and the land (Hitt, 2019). The summit of Maunakea is so sacred that the people rarely go there themselves, as described by Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahēle:

There was no wanting to go to [the] top. [...] And so it was kind of a hallowed place that you know it is there, and you don't need to go there. You don't need to bother it. [...] And it was always reassuring because it was the foundation of our island. [...] If you want to reach mana, that [the summit] is where you go. (Kanahēle, 1999, as cited in Hitt, 2019)

From the perspective of the Kānaka Maoli, the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope represents a

desecration of sacred land. In protest, the *kia'i*, who are known as the guardians of the sacred land in the Native tradition, attempted to physically stop the development through a system of "corporeal refusals and collective resurgence" (Maile, 2019, p. 58). One protestor, Jazmyne Alston, attested to the gravity of the protests, describing how "watching the Kupunas [elders] I knew get arrested was a chilling experience [...]. In a world of unwanted colonization, I feel that the last thing they should be taking is the Mauna" (J. Alston, personal communication, May 13, 2020). For Native Hawaiians, the struggle against the Thirty Meter Telescope is a struggle to preserve their connection with the land, which is intrinsically tied to their personhood.

As the fight against the Thirty Meter Telescope continues, Hawaii's Supreme Court has approved the telescope's construction. According to the TMT International Observatory, the base of the structure was set to be completed on June 25, 2020. The site also boasts a finish date of July 20, 2027, proclaiming that, on that day, the observatory will be "ready for science!!" (TMT International Observatory, n.d.). In this case, Native Hawaiian culture has not only been sidelined, but deemed of little importance to the United States by an official Hawaiian governing body. In the words of David Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile, the construction of the TMT telescope is nothing short of "capitalist-colonialist violence disguised as scientific progress" (Maile, 2019, p. 62).

In the cases of both Standing Rock and Maunakea, there has been a devaluation of Native cultures in pursuit of the U.S.'s "capitalist-colonialist" goals. Within these examples, a clearer understanding of the word "ecoracism" can be achieved. In deciding to capitalize on sacred spaces, a judgment is imposed on the cultures that hold those spaces dear, and said cultures are thus marginalized and devalued. I argue that this creates expendable bodies, delineating those who are nonessential to society. While this ongoing process of creating expendable bodies is uniquely visible in the cases of Native peoples, it has already occurred many times over in spaces occupied by racial minorities and impoverished communities. In the following sections, I will further illuminate how this process has led to increasing environmental degradation of the spaces in which expendable bodies reside, and how these bodies

² In this paper, I adhere to the guidelines of The University of Hawaii Hilo School of Hawaiian Language in using "Maunakea" spelled as one word, since it relates to a specific place and serves as a proper noun. As two words, "Mauna Kea" means "white mountain" and functions as a descriptor.

have ultimately suffered from embodied toxicity due to the toxic conditions of their environments.

III. EMBODIED TOXICITY

In her piece, “Denormalizing Embodied Toxicity,” American Studies professor Julie Sze references Stacey Alaimo’s idea of trans-corporeality:

The human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world. [...] The body is enmeshed in social and material systems and systems of domination that are enacted in individual and community bodies, cultural representations, and modes of knowing and thinking. (Alaimo, 2010, as cited in Sze, 2018, p. 107)

In emphasizing the porous quality of our human bodies, Alaimo develops an understanding of the body as constantly permeated by social and environmental factors. This pushes studies of embodied toxicity past the typical black-and-white considerations of human experience and wellbeing, calling scholars and scientists alike to consider the unseen, abstract nature of humans’ relationship with their surrounding environment and social structures. Allowing for consideration of this “messy” grey space prompts consideration of the intersectionality of this issue, leading to further examination of the connections between the many factors that shape the human experience.

Through this framework, one can better understand the systems at work in the case of Kettleman City. Kettleman City is a small town of 1,500 people, just over an hour’s drive from Bakersfield, California and only 3.5 miles from the largest hazardous waste facility west of the Mississippi River (Sze, 2018). The town’s population is majority Latinx and low-income, and many residents are undocumented (Sze, 2018). These factors have caused the State of California to overlook the people of Kettleman City and the adverse health effects they continue to suffer as a result of toxic environmental pollutants. The population is continually subjected to pollutants through runoff from surrounding farmland; there are elevated levels of arsenic and benzene in their water; the town receives sewage from Los Angeles; and there is constant exposure to emissions from trucks driving on the nearby interstate (Sze, 2018). One of the

greatest contributing factors to the creation of this toxic environment is the nearby hazardous waste facility, which is owned by Chemical Waste Management Inc. (Chem Waste). According to Sze, “the company has been fined more than \$2 million over twenty-eight years for violations such as the mishandling of PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls], and most recently for not following proper quality-control procedures” (Sze, 2018, p. 110).

The people of Kettleman City had been suffering from adverse health effects caused by living near hazardous waste for over a decade before the State of California took notice in 2007, after a slew of babies were born with cleft palates and other birth defects (Sze, 2018). Before this, Kettleman City citizens had suffered from higher rates of asthma, cancer, and miscarriages (Sze, 2018). Public outcry about the birth defects finally led the governor to instruct the Department of Public Health and the Environmental Protection Agency to conduct an investigation (Sze, 2018). However, it became clear that the questions asked by the study focused on the individual actions of the people of Kettleman City rather than the system and pollution that they were suffering from. The mothers of the children with birth defects were asked to recount their actions and behaviors as possible causes of their babies’ health conditions. As one mother stated bluntly,

You want to know if we ever smoked cigarettes or took drugs. [...] I’m telling you that if the dump is allowed to expand, we’ll suffer more damage and illness. Why? Because we are poor and Hispanic. The people who issue those permits don’t care about us getting sick from it because all they think about is money. (Sze, 2018, p. 115)

In choosing this phrasing for their questions, the investigators sought to reframe the issue to implicate the citizens themselves, taking the pollution caused by nearby industry out of the equation.

When the results of the study came out, residents were dismayed. While the report affirmed that there were higher levels of pollutants in the residents’ environment, it did not make a link to where these may have originated (Sze, 2018). While citizens continue to fight for government intervention in the expansion of the waste

facility, the report allowed the State of California to remove Kettleman City from the spotlight, disregarding their continued suffering.

The example of Kettleman City illuminates how the issue of embodied toxicity can be normalized. Because those who suffered from embodied toxicity were predominantly Latinx and low-income, they were already viewed as expendable by the U.S. government and much of society. Therefore, their suffering from toxic waste was easily pushed from the public purview.

IV. REFRAMING ECO-SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

While the suffering of those in Kettleman City went largely unseen in part because the population was made up of expendable bodies, it is also true that toxic contamination on the body is often hard to see. As such, activists face a unique battle in raising awareness. There are multiple factors that play into the invisibility of toxic contamination. The speed at which toxic contamination occurs is in itself an obstacle to its visibility. Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence" addresses the nature of gradual harm on a population, referring to "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2013, p. 2). In applying this concept to toxic contamination on the body, one can more clearly understand how a violence that takes place slowly and increases gradually may not capture the public's attention. The sensational nature of news cycles is not conducive to issues of slow violence, as these either seem too insignificant or occur over too long of a period to fit the programming.

In a more literal sense, issues of toxic contamination are typically not visible. Toxic pollutants often spread undetected in communities for years before their harm is noticed. As Associate Professor Phaedra C. Pezzullo writes, "one of the primary constraints for anti-toxic activists is a lack of visual evidence. If you are familiar with toxins you know that their detection often is not predicated on sight" (Pezzullo, 2014, p. 29). This literal invisibility makes it difficult to spread awareness of these issues, as the contaminant cannot be easily visually represented. In a similar sense, the harmful effects of toxic contamination are not immediate in the body, and tracing the pathway of the pollutant to a victim's cancer

is far messier than connecting a victim's broken arm to a car accident.

With the gradual nature of toxic contamination, its lack of visibility—and the simple fact that sufferers are often marginalized peoples—activists are presented with a complex labyrinth of barriers to affecting change for communities. However, by altering the framework of activist discourse and imagery around toxic contamination, these issues can be better expressed to the public.

In his 2015 article, "Toxic Portraits: Resisting Multiple Invisibilities in the Environmental Justice Movement," Joshua Trey Barnett examines how portraits can be used to effectively argue the existence of toxic contamination and motivate viewers to act (Barnett, 2015). Barnett highlights the aforementioned obstacle of tracing the origin of a victim's illness back to the toxic source, and therefore argues that for a toxic portrait to be effective, it must include a connection to the site that is producing the toxic waste (Barnett, 2015). In one photograph that Barnett cites, Horace Smith, a resident of Corpus Christi, is shown with the backdrop of a nearby refinery (Barnett, 2015).

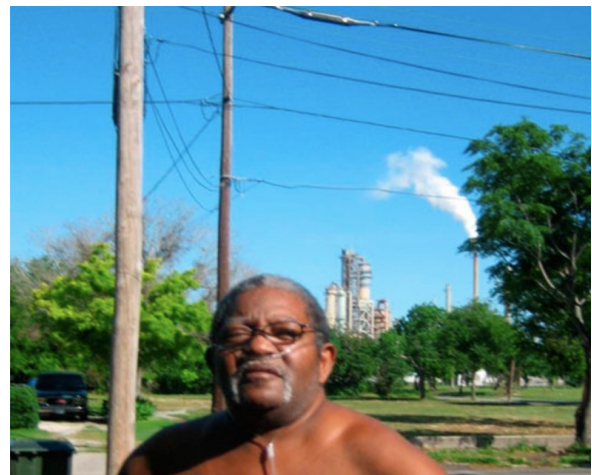


Figure 1: Horace Smith stands in his hometown of Corpus Christi in front of a nearby refinery. (Barnett, 2015, Corpus Cristi [Photograph])

In the photo, Smith wears an oxygen tube to breathe. Without the backdrop, the origin of Smith's health condition would be untraceable to the viewer, but positioning him in front of the refinery clearly implicates it in the shot. As Barnett writes,

By picturing human bodies in toxically assaulted places, toxic portraits like these resist multiple invisibilities. Together with textual narratives, toxic portraits make visible the interconnections between human bodies, toxic pollution, and the pain and suffering that frequently result from their combination. (Barnett, 2015, p. 421)

By highlighting the importance of including polluters in photos of embodied toxicity, Barnett's piece channels the power of photography for toxic contamination advocacy.

In a different sense, the rhetoric of activists can also be used strategically to resist traditional invisibilities. Activists succeed when they are able to reframe the lens through which opposing forces justify the creation of new toxic sites or obfuscate the link between toxic pollutants and victims' health conditions. In one case study of an underprivileged town resisting the development of a new garbage incinerator in their neighborhood, activists' arguments incorporated themes of identity, effectively employing these themes to change the nature of discourse surrounding the incinerator's installation. One such theme was the role of a concerned mother: "We were compelled to unite, because the future quality of life for our children is being threatened" (Peeples, 2003, p. 24). In deploying this trope, activists were able to accomplish three things. First, it served as a rallying cry under which mothers throughout the community could unite to protect their children—a noble goal by popular standards. Second, it allowed women without much education on health and safety to speak with more authority. Third, it gave the women a permissible basis for entering the realm of politics (Peeples, 2003). By using identity-based language to structure discourse, the women of this community were able to qualify their personhood and gain an agency of which they had initially been deprived due to their position in society.

To achieve more effective advocacy strategy for those affected by toxic contamination, it is imperative for activists to think critically about the imagery and rhetoric they use. In doing so, the many barriers that inhibit protestors from affecting change—physical invisibility, the slow rate of toxic contamination, and victims' societal positions as expendable bodies—may be counteracted.

V. CONCLUSION

Using her trademark performative style, Donna Haraway argues that "it matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. [...] It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories" (Haraway, 2016, p. 35). When approaching issues of ecoracism and embodied toxicity, it is necessary to step outside traditional modes of thought to observe underlying patterns. Once this is done, it becomes clear that ecoracism results in an othering that marginalizes affected groups and creates expendable bodies which are far more likely to suffer from embodied toxicity. By using this knowledge to inform advocacy, activists can shape photography and rhetoric to ultimately dismantle systems of ecoracism and embodied toxicity.

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