

DAVID NAGUIB PELLOW

**WHAT IS  
CRITICAL  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
JUSTICE?**



“David Pellow has once again pushed the boundaries of environmental justice scholarship with this pivotal new text. *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* offers a politically robust and theoretically informed way forward that enables environmental justice to be more inclusive, while not losing its oppositional nature. This is the book that the environmental justice movement has been waiting for.”

Laura Pulido, University of Oregon

“Asking what environmental justice could look like if we moved beyond race and class, Pellow develops a robust, ‘Critical Environmental Justice Studies’ framework that draws from numerous scholarly fields, which he then uses to skillfully unite issues such as Black Lives Matter, the US prison industrial complex, and conflicts in Israel and Palestine.”

Julian Agyeman, Tufts University

Human societies have always been deeply interconnected with our ecosystems, but today those relationships are witnessing greater frictions, tensions, and harms than ever before. These harms mirror those experienced by marginalized groups across the planet, but they also provide a foundation for transformative thinking and action to address these challenges.

In this novel book, David Naguib Pellow introduces a new framework for critically analyzing Environmental Justice scholarship and activism. In doing so he extends the field’s focus to topics not usually associated with environmental justice, including the Israel/Palestine conflict and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. In doing so he reveals that ecological violence is first and foremost a form of social violence, driven by and legitimated by social structures and discourses. He offers a radical new approach to Environmental Justice analysis and politics. Those already familiar with the discipline will find themselves invited to think about the subject in entirely new ways.

This book will be a vital resource for students, scholars, and policy makers interested in innovative approaches to one of the greatest challenges facing humanity and the planet.

**David Naguib Pellow** is Dehlsen Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara

polity

www.politybooks.com

Cover illustration:  
wassily-architect/  
Shutterstock

Cover design by  
Rawshock Design

Printed in  
Great Britain



9 780745 679389 >

# WHAT IS CRITICAL JOURNALISM ESSENTIAL FOR?

PELLOW

polity

# What is Critical Environmental Justice?

*David Naguib Pellow*

polity

Copyright © David Naguib Pellow 2018

The right of David Naguib Pellow to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2018 by Polity Press

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
101 Station Landing, Suite 300  
Medford, MA 02155, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7937-2  
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7938-9 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11/13 Sabon by  
Servis Filmsetting Limited, Stockport, Cheshire  
Printed and bound in the UK by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: [www.politybooks.com](http://www.politybooks.com)

What is Critical Environmental Justice?

## **Dedication**

To Sun-Hee and Jin-Young – thank you for giving me hope  
and sharing your love

To Y.I.M.J.R.S.I. – thank you for guiding and connecting  
all of us

## *Acknowledgments*

As much as I would like to take full credit for this project, it turns out that researching, writing, and publishing a book is always a collective effort. I am indebted to a great number of people for sharing their ideas, criticisms, guidance, and labors to make this work possible. Students who provided me with critical assistance along the way include: Marjan Abubo, Mark Avalos, Reid Bongard, Martha Escobar, Sheila Estrada, Denise Garcia, Erin Hoekstra, Sanna King, Rebecca Kinney, Annie Milburn, Ivan Rodriguez, Alison Thompson, Ashkaun Shaterian, Yue (Rachel) Shen, and Amy Tam.

I want to thank my colleagues, students, and friends at UCSB who have warmly welcomed me into the Santa Barbara community with open arms and so much support. They include: Peter Alagona, Celia Alario, Javiera Barandiaran, Vilna Bashi-Treitler, Joe Blankholm, Eileen Boris, Angela Boyd, Oliver Chadwick, Alenda Chang, Grace Chang, Maria Charles, Jia-Ching Chen, Jordan Clark, Mariah Brennan Clegg, David Cleveland, Carla D'Antonio, Mona Damluji, Hilal Elver, Richard Falk (who gave me really helpful feedback on chapter 4), Ingrid Feeney, Richard Flacks, John Foran, Diane Fujino, Helene Gardner, Hunter Gelbach, Avery Gordon, Corrie Grosse, Hahrie Han, Robert Heilmayr, Cami Helmuth, Ken Hiltner, Cheryl Hutton, Melody Jue, Terence Keel, Ed Keller, Zachary King, Renan LaRue, Theo LeQuesne, Mel Manalis, Matto Mildenberger, Dena Montague, Erinn O'Shea, Michelle Oyewole, Sameer Pandya,



## *Acknowledgments*

Tristan Partridge, Simone Pulver, Martin Rodriguez, Josh Schimel, Daniela Soleri, Jeffrey Stewart, Leah Stokes, Susan Stonich, Ra Thea, Jennifer Tyburczy, Richard Widick, Bob Wilkinson, Emily Williams, and Eric Zimmerman.

A big thanks to friends and colleagues at the University of Minnesota (Cawo Abdi, Ron Aminzade, Liz Boyle, Bruce Braun, Vinay Gidwani, Michael Goldman, Teresa Gowan, George Henderson, and Rachel Schurman), the University of California at Davis (Thomas Beamish, Vicky Smith, Julie Sze, Jonathan London, Lindsey Dillon, Jacque Leaver, and Ingrid Behrsin), Vanderbilt University (David Hess, Zdravka Tzankova, Holly McCammon, André Christie-Mizell, Rachel McKane, Anna Jacobs, Magdalena Sudibjo, Lacey Satcher, Larry Isaac, Kate Pride Brown, Lijun Song, and Anne Wall), and the University of Michigan (Dorceta Taylor, Rebecca Hardin, Sonia Joshi, Ivette Perfecto, and Paul Mohai) for offering space to share and receive feedback on many of the ideas contained in this volume.

Colleagues spread far and wide across the country who were also instrumental in this effort include Hollie Nyseth-Brehm, Joni Adamson, Kari Norgaard, Shannon Bell, Julian Agyeman, Traci Brynne Voyles, Laura Pulido, Sylvia Hood Washington, Beth Schaefer Caniglia, Manuel Vallee, Beatrice Frank, Brian Mayer, J. Timmons Roberts, David Takeuchi, Sara Bruya, Yonette Thomas, Samantha Teixeira, Mia White, Anthony Nocella II, Ryan Holifield, Panagioti Tsoikas, and Mike Ewall.

And at Polity Press, my editor Jonathan Skerrett and Editorial Assistant Amy Williams have been wonderful partners throughout this process, and I am grateful to the extraordinary anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, and Ann Klefstad for her outstanding copy editing. I also have to extend a big thank you to Emma Longstaff who, while at Polity some years back, extended a generous invitation to me and came up with the initial idea that eventually resulted in this book.



# *Contents*

Acknowledgments	<i>page vi</i>
1. Critical Environmental Justice Studies	1
2. Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge	34
3. Prisons and the Fight for Environmental Justice	67
4. The Israel/Palestine Conflict as an Environmental Justice Struggle	110
Conclusion	149
Notes	154
Bibliography	170
Index	198

# 1

## *Critical Environmental Justice Studies*

Michael Brown was an African-American teenager living in Ferguson, Missouri. On August 9, 2014, police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed him, sparking worldwide outrage at the seemingly unending series of police shootings of African-Americans. When protesters took to the streets of cities around the US and the world to declare that “Black Lives Matter,” they and those who were the targets of police shootings were frequently referred to as “animals.” Juana Gutiérrez is the daughter of a Mexican farmer; she immigrated to the US at age fifteen. She started an organization called Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA), which has fought to keep prisons from being built in her city and around the state of California. Nicholas Morrissey was an inmate at a state prison in LaBelle, Pennsylvania, who suffered from a chronic illness he believes was caused by the fact that the prison is next to a coal ash dump. Foad al-Amodi is president of the fishermen’s syndicate in Khan Younis, a town in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. His livelihood is threatened because the fish that he and his customers depend upon are dying from exposure to the massive volume of sewage that flows into the Mediterranean Sea – a result of the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, which has prevented the purchase of much-needed equipment to upgrade Gaza’s waste management system. Havah Ha-Levi was a Jewish Israeli woman who lived in a kibbutz near an old Palestinian Arab village, Sarkas, which was destroyed and converted into a garbage dump. In her memoir she writes, “Yet I remember. I

## *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*

testify.” State-sanctioned police killings of black people. Prisons and jails. The Israel/Palestine conflict. Each of these cases reveals how human suffering and social inequality also are sites where that pain is intimately linked to the harm visited upon fragile ecosystems and other animals. And each of these cases speaks to the ways that ordinary people and, in some cases nonhumans, have worked for environmental and social justice.

Human societies have always been deeply interconnected with our nonhuman relations and with ecosystems, but today those relationships are witnessing greater frictions, tensions, and harms than ever before, prompting scholars to label this epoch the *Anthropocene* because of the dominance of the human species on planet Earth. And while that dominance has led to incalculable damage to ecosystems and to human societies as well, the opportunities for addressing these problems and challenges are within our grasp, if we only dare to break out of conventional modes of thinking and action. The harms suffered by ecosystems today are closely linked to and mirror the harms experienced by the most marginalized human beings across the planet – what many scholars call the problem of *environmental injustice*. For example, where we find rivers dammed for hydropower plants we also tend to find indigenous peoples and fisherfolk, as well as other working people, whose livelihoods and health are harmed as a result; when sea life suffers from exposure to toxins such as mercury, we find that human beings also endure the effects of mercury when they consume those animals; and the intersecting character of multiple forms of inequality is revealed when nuclear radiation or climate change affects all species and humans across all social class levels, racial/ethnic groups, genders, abilities, and ages. The power (or agency) of the more-than-human world is on display here as well when, for example, nuclear radiation or extreme climate patterns are triggered by human actions and then, in turn, exert their own force on various bodies, spaces, and ecosystems. The agency of human beings is evident when people imagine and work to bring about a different set of relationships with each other and with the more-than-human world through art, protest, music, research, planning, and other forms of action.

## *Critical Environmental Justice Studies*

Environmental justice struggles reveal how power flows through the multi-species relationships that make up life on Earth, often resulting in violence and marginalization for the many and environmental privileges for the few. But environmental justice struggles are also evident – *if* we are paying close attention – within spaces of conflict and collaboration that are not always typically defined as “environmental.” Consider, for example, the roles that land, air, water, and nonhuman species play in the Black Lives Matter movement, in the construction and maintenance of the US prison industrial complex, and in religious and ethnic conflicts in Israel and Palestine. I draw on each of these examples in this book to explore the future of environmental justice research and politics. One path toward this future is made clearer through what I call Critical Environmental Justice Studies.

In our book *Power, Justice, and the Environment*,<sup>1</sup> Robert Brulle and I used the term “Critical Environmental Justice Studies” to call for scholarship that builds on research in Environmental Justice (EJ) Studies by questioning assumptions and gaps in earlier work in the field, by embracing greater interdisciplinarity, and moving toward methodologies and epistemologies including and beyond the social sciences. A number of other scholars have adopted this term as well, as they work to expand the academic field and politics of environmental justice.<sup>2</sup> In the rest of this chapter I offer an overview of some key ideas and advances from the field of EJ studies and introduce the concept of Critical EJ Studies as a way of pushing the ideas and potential of earlier generations of EJ studies into new and productive directions. I view Critical EJ Studies not as an alternative to earlier-generation EJ studies, but as an extension of that foundational scholarship.

### *Environmental Justice Studies: An Overview of the Field*

Why Critical Environmental Justice Studies? In order to answer that question, I must first offer an overview of the field of Environmental Justice Studies. But before one considers the

## *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*

scholarly research on the topic of environmental justice (EJ), we must begin with the EJ movement. The US EJ movement gained visibility and strength beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as activists and movement networks confronted a range of toxic hazards that were disproportionately located in communities of color (while the closely related Anti-Toxics movement was concentrated primarily in white working-class neighborhoods). This movement fused discourses of public health, civil and human rights, anti-racism, social justice, and ecological sustainability with tactics such as civil disobedience, public protests, and legal action to prevent the construction or expansion of unwanted and controversial facilities and developments such as landfills, incinerators, mines, and chemical plants. Activists also demanded that owners of existing facilities improve their operational safety, reduce pollution levels, and provide economic benefits to and offer power sharing with local residents or face the threat of being shut down. This movement sought to openly integrate campaigns for justice on behalf of vulnerable human beings with the goal of ecological sustainability.<sup>3</sup> From the movement's early days, activists sought environmental justice not only through shutting down polluting facilities, but also by demanding and creating access to parks and green space and affordable, healthy foods,<sup>4</sup> safe neighborhoods, and for climate-related policies and practices that are socially just and ecologically sustainable.<sup>5</sup> Thus even during its earliest days, the EJ movement articulated a transformative vision of what an environmentally and socially just and sustainable future might look like, at the local, regional, national, and global scales. For example, during the historic Environmental Justice Summit conference in 1991, participants drafted what became known as the Principles of Environmental Justice, which not only embrace a synthesis of anti-racism and ecological sustainability but also support anti-militarist, anti-imperialist, gender-justice politics. The Principles also recognize the inherent and cultural worth of nonhuman natures.<sup>6</sup>

The EJ movement is largely comprised of people from communities of color, indigenous communities, and working-class communities who are focused on combating environmental injus-

## *Critical Environmental Justice Studies*

tice, racism, and gender and class inequalities that are most visibly manifested in the disproportionate burden of environmental harm facing these populations. For the EJ movement, the battle for global sustainability cannot be won without addressing the ecological violence imposed on vulnerable human populations; thus social justice (that is, justice for humans) is inseparable from environmental protection.

### **What Is Environmental Justice?**

EJ Studies scholar Robert Bullard defines environmental justice as the principle that “all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations.”<sup>7</sup> The US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) definition further elaborates on this principle by defining environmental justice as:

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no population, due to policy or economic disempowerment, is forced to bear a disproportionate share of the negative human health or environmental impacts of pollution or environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local and tribal programs and policies.<sup>8</sup>

While environmental justice is a vision of a possible future, environmental inequality (or environmental *injustice*) generally refers to a situation in which a particular social group is disproportionately affected by environmental hazards.<sup>9</sup> One specific form of environmental inequality is the phenomenon of environmental racism, which Benjamin Chavis first defined this way:

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants



## *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*

in our communities, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the ecology movements.<sup>10</sup>

Thus environmental racism “refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color.”<sup>11</sup> The scholarship and social movement focused on environmental racism and inequality sought to develop a vision of its opposite – environmental justice – which often involved a call for new legislation and the fair application of existing laws. In this chapter and throughout the book, I consider both the promise and limitations of such an approach, which seeks a path to justice through the state.

## *What is Environmental Justice (EJ) Studies?*

The field of EJ Studies has moved us toward a clear understanding that, where we find social inequalities by race and class, we tend to also find environmental inequalities in the form of marginalized groups being exposed to greater levels of pollution, toxics, “natural” disasters and the effects of climate change/disruption, as well as their exclusion from policymaking bodies that influence those outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Researchers have also refined and improved our ability to measure the details and granularity of spatial environmental inequalities by race, class, and space.<sup>13</sup> For example, in the study *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty*, the authors offered new evidence that *clustering* of environmental hazards – rather than just single sources of pollution – is a significant and measurable threat to communities of color.<sup>14</sup> In that report, the authors also challenged the “minority move-in hypothesis,” which was the claim that people of color move into polluted neighborhoods rather than being targeted by polluters. To the contrary, the authors found that polluting facilities actually single out communities of color more often than not, moving into neighborhoods with high percentages of minority residents. This disturbing finding has extraordinary sociological and policy implications and was a major development in the field of EJ Studies, since up to that point there was a lively debate on this topic.