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Engaging Narratives: Environmental Essentialism and Intersectional Justice

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Introduction

When we consider environmental challenges, especially in a policy-oriented context, there is an understandable predisposition to be analytical and strategic in the pursuit of viable political and economic solutions. There is a basic recognition at work in most quarters that the mounting crises in our midst—from toxification and degradation to resource conflicts and climate destabilization—are monumental in scope, and that they require coordinated, multilayered efforts in order to be remediated. Governmental representatives, private sector entrepreneurs, civil society organizations, and on-the-ground practitioners generally converge around the core idea that environmental issues are escalating, and a confluence of political, economic, technological, and informational mechanisms are required in order to address them meaningfully. As such, the scope of environmental engagement largely resides in the technical and political realm, yielding a policy-driven framework defined mainly by diplomatic negotiations and bilateral agreements.

Indeed, these are all potent mechanisms for addressing such complex problems, yet they only tell part of the story. Beyond considerations of political economy, governance, data, and technology, there are the narratives, perspectives, and livelihoods of multitudes of people around the world who experience these issues and challenges in direct and concrete ways. Exploring and validating the interior and emotive domains of coping with profound environmental challenges—including motivations, deprivations, reflections, accommodations, and resistances—can inform the policymaking sphere in critical ways. The adaptation of these narratives could itself reproduce, rather than challenge, the power dynamics that underlie the causes of environmental injustices if applied uncritically. The native voices could be coopted in ways that cast these people and places as symbolically valorized *others* or powerless victims that are in need of protection by *us*. However, by recentering these narratives, a critical stance is being cultivated in

helping to unpack the potential pitfalls of an increasing tendency to highlight personal stories as a means of asserting greater technical control. In some cases, these patterns go so far as to affirm historical identity constructions that raise fundamental issues of justice.¹ This article critically explores these issues, striving to investigate the narrative terrains of environmental engagement as a means of cultivating more robust policies, in the belief that durable solutions to profound crises must address issues at the political and personal levels alike.

In this work, we are guided by the realization that the political and personal spheres are inherently interconnected, and are continually being shaped by each other; it is precisely this dialectical relationship that leads us to an inquiry into how narratives reflect our understanding of both realms. As such, narratives of empowerment can be coopted by the larger political forces that created conditions of exploitation in the first place, necessitating a critical re-reading of both the narratives and the power dynamics involved in creating and communicating them. In mapping this terrain, we draw upon materials from policy and academic spheres, as well as publications from advocacy and entrepreneurial sectors, with a specific focus on how gender shapes or gets shaped in these narratives. In particular, the identification of “stakeholders” in environmental governance forums at the global scale often devolves upon a top-down model in which decisions are taken by state or corporate actors, leaving individuals and communities in bystander (or even demonstrator) role. The implications for women in this dynamic are especially problematic, since “a sensitive approach to addressing gender-specific vulnerability and resilience ... is still lacking in policy on the environment and conflict.”²

¹ Dickinson, Elizabeth. 2012. Addressing Environmental Racism Through Storytelling: Toward an Environmental Justice Narrative Framework. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5 (1): 57-74.

² Reid, Alex. 2017. Understanding Gender, Conflict, and the Environment. *Toxic Remnants of War Project* (June 5). Accessed 2017. Available from <http://www.trwn.org/understanding-gender-conflict-and-the-environment/>

Here, we seek to encourage a more participatory process by straightforwardly bringing voices that are often excluded to the fore, through a critical discourse analysis of current policymaking and marketing trends within environmental efforts. Critical discourse analysis examines “social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use,”³ and explores how power and social relationships manifest in written or spoken language. Using this approach, we examine terms such as “victims” or “heroes” not simply as a description of someone’s inherent status, but as an embodiment of who has the power to ascribe status to others. Our intention is to frame these issues of power, representation, and legitimation for further exploration, highlighting examples of how personal narratives of potential environmental empowerment can be utilized by powerful actors for divergent purposes, and how these forces mirror patterns found vis-à-vis the role of women in many developing regions of the world. In order to do so, we draw upon examples of texts and publications gleaned from the field, and interrogate their linguistic choices and the power dynamics within their presentation. We conclude by connecting these issues to larger struggles in the environmental justice milieu.

Interior and Emotive Terrains of Environmentalism

Environmental issues can be expressed through technical, scientific, and data-driven means, but they can also be thought of in more humanistic and even emotional terms. One can clinically analyze the loss of biodiversity or the poisoning of waterways in a manner that creates distance between ourselves and the living things (including people) impacted by these precipitous transformations; such interventions resonate impressively on Powerpoint slides and in legislative

³ Weiss, Gilbert, and Ruth Wodak, eds. 2003, 15. *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

drafting sessions, yet they omit equally critical factors of compassion, interconnection, empowerment, trauma, loss, and more. In short, it might be said that the analytical approach oftentimes prioritizes the workings of the mind as against those of the heart. This is perhaps understandable in managing parliamentary-type proceedings, but there may be unintended consequences including the further separation of humans from the biotic systems of the planet.

This is a complex subject to broach, because (among other things) it plays into stereotypes of environmentalists as “tree huggers” and threatens to cloud sober judgment with sentimentalism. Public displays of emotion can create an impression of vulnerability and weaken one’s position at the bargaining table. By keeping the discussion at the analytical level—for instance, in representing lost habitats, species, or even human casualties as data points on a graph, or by discussing human rights issues such as refugeeism or negative health consequences in purely quantitative terms—one can perhaps enhance the impact and strength of their argument while at the same time losing an important part of its texture. When the presentation of critical issues remains at the strictly technical or political level, it can serve to obscure the actual people and ecosystems being impacted. In this sense, the magnitude of concern over environmental issues can at times be displayed without showing as much concern for those directly impacted.

It is this context that we are oftentimes presented with information about people being uprooted *en masse* by desertification and climate disruption, about the imminent submersion of island nations, about the severe long-term health impacts of post-conflict environmental contamination, or even about the myriad frontline environmental defenders who have paid with their lives to confront patterns of degradation and despoliation. Clinical assessments and data-driven presentations are important, yet there is a concomitant need to hear from impacted communities directly. Interestingly, some stakeholders grasp this integrative dynamic, even as

the method used to address it may serve to further exacerbate the problem. Thus, numerous presentations and publications (which we analyze in more detail below) will include an invocation of someone's "story" (often a woman from the developing world) as a means to highlight the efficacy of their innovative technology or the utility of their policy platform. Needless to say, those whose stories are featured in this way rarely, if ever, attend the forums to convey these narratives themselves.

"The story of..." is thus a popular entry point for highlighting an array of technological innovations (e.g., solar lights; clean stoves) and policy proposals (e.g., microfinance; mediation). The virtues of flexibility, mobility, on-demand and sharing economies, and sociopolitical empowerment may be touted through these "stories" but they are likely to be told *about* rather than *by* those featured in them. In fact, some of these innovations are premised on a pay-as-you-go business model that provides access to them with little or no upfront costs—but with the caveat that they can also be removed promptly for nonpayment. The empowerment of women (generally women of color) may be invoked as a selling point, as may be the benefits for students and, of course, the overall greening of the environment. However, if these technologies are positioned to empower women, open up educational opportunities for children, and mitigate environmental harm, then turning them off for nonpayment might be more heartless than not providing them in the first place. What is needed are effective solutions that integrate minds and hearts equally, as we move from centralized models to more collaborative ones, and ultimately as human beings attempting to cope with the urgent responsibility of transforming our environmental relations.

In this spirit, environmental discourse at times does include the direct (and even heartfelt) stories of people struggling to mitigate and adapt to a rapidly changing world. Thus, the former

president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, poignantly describes the imminent submersion of his island nation by rising ocean levels without rancor or recrimination, imploring people everywhere to embrace a spirit of ethical engagement and common humanity.⁴ Human rights advocates communicate the compelling stories of ordinary people who become activists by necessity and work to transform conditions in their communities as well as our understanding of how change works—sometimes paying with their lives for these efforts, as with the case of Honduran activist Berta Cáceres.⁵ Engaging these narratives in a meaningful manner, without further “otherizing” or exploiting their progenitors, is a fundamental challenge for environmental movements and policymakers. A critical analysis of the role that gender in particular plays in these processes can help inform the wider discussion of these core issues.

Gendered Lenses and Environmental Essentialism

In the annals of environmentalism, the role of gender is central yet often underexplored. While there have been many investigations of the differential impacts of ecological challenges on women, as well as the intersections of these patterns through lenses such as *ecofeminism*,⁶ less considered in the analysis is the nascent view of women as “sustainability saviors” and the implications of such constructions. In essence, the argument is that due to their close connection to the material bases of life in many locales—including procuring food, fuel, water, and other essentials—women have a unique perspective and capacity to address environmental challenges

⁴ Tong, Anote. 2016. The Global Challenge of Climate-Induced Migration. *Global Future(s) Initiative*, Georgetown University (November 11). Accessed 2017. Available from <https://globalfutures.georgetown.edu/responses/the-global-challenge-of-climate-induced-migration>

⁵ Watts, Jonathan. 2016. Berta Cáceres, Honduran Human Rights and Environment Activist, Murdered. *The Guardian* (March 4). Accessed 2017. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/03/honduras-berta-caceres-murder-environment-activist-human-rights>

⁶ Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva, eds. 1993. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books.

in important ways. While this can be empowering, it also potentially reifies historical associations of gender and nature that are problematic, as well as running up against a core tenet of *environmental justice* stating that people who contribute the least to crises are often impacted the most by them—and further that it should not then fall upon them to be primarily responsible for remediating those crises. We engage these matters without resorting to either victimization or valorization by cultivating pathways toward collaborative ecological engagement, emphasizing policy frameworks and lived experiences equally in seeking tenable and durable solutions.

In order to do so, we need to unpack some of the strands that have brought us here. From a historical perspective, there is the sensibility expressed by Sir Francis Bacon advocating the “torture of nature for her secrets.” While this precise quote is likely apocryphal, Carolyn Merchant observes that its intent is wholly consistent with the rationalist/scientific paradigm, for which “the rack exemplified the constraint of nature in a closed, controlled system, responding to questions posed by an inquisitor before witnesses—the very core of experimentation itself.”⁷ This paradigm is reflective of an impetus to correlate gender and nature, which is operationalized, as Greta Gaard contends, in “the ways that the feminized status of women, animals, nature, and feminized others ... have been conceived of as separate and inferior in order to legitimate their subordination under an elite and often violent and militarized male-dominant social order.”⁸ Bringing this analysis into contemporary issues, Gaard offers this historical backdrop as a basis for reconsidering the mounting challenges in our midst: “The global crises of climate justice, food security, energy justice, vanishing wildlife, maldevelopment, habitat loss,

⁷ Merchant, Carolyn. 2006. The Scientific Revolution and *The Death of Nature*. *Isis* 97 (3): 513.

⁸ Gaard, Greta. 2011. Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism. *Feminist Formations* 23 (2): 26.

industrial animal food production, and more have simultaneously social and ecological dimensions that require both ecological and feminist analyses.”⁹

Today, however, this lens often looks more like depicting women as either victims or saviors in the environmental policy discourse. Thus it is stated that “women’s knowledge, agency and collective action has huge potential to improve resource productivity, enhance ecosystem conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, and to create more sustainable, low-carbon food, energy, water and health systems. Failure to capitalize on this would be a missed opportunity. Women should not be viewed as victims, but as central actors in moving towards sustainability.”¹⁰ As we elaborate below, there are numerous ways in which this discourse is framed and promoted, with myriad examples that seek to cast women—due to their “special” roles and skills in many developing societies—as nascent environmental heroines. Constructions of empowerment are often invoked, linking “the causes and underlying drivers of unsustainability and gender inequality,” advocating for giving women “greater voice and participation” as a means to generate more sustainable outcomes, and setting a premium on “women’s knowledge, agency and action” as a tool of sustainability (passages noted below).

While this isn’t inherently problematic, the larger context of the discourse is illustrative of the potential pitfalls and how historical patterns of gender essentialism can be replicated, even with ostensibly positive intentions—as the following linked passages illustrate (emphases added):

“This is a project intended to celebrate the role of women in science, technology, sailing.

Not only does it break down gender stereotypes, but it also harnesses the power of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ UN Women. 2014, 7. *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Gender Equality and Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations (report).

*them.*¹¹ “Women are not merely passive victims of climate change and environmental degradation.... *Women are a driving force for the new, more equitable and more sustainable model of growth.*”¹² “[*Women’s*] knowledge, innovation, action and agency is central to finding, demonstrating and building more economically, socially and ecologically sustainable ways to manage local ecologies, adapt to climate change, produce and access food and secure sustainable and appropriate water, sanitation and energy services.”¹³ “*Energy prosperity has a female face....* There is a strong case for what women can do to expand clean energy access and to fight on the front lines against climate change.”¹⁴

Even within this same body of literature there is a recognition of the potential problems with these constructions, including how they potentially reify historical patterns. The self-reflective nature of these claims and critiques is worth presenting in some detail (emphases added):

“Policy responses that view women as ‘sustainability saviors’ draw upon and **reinforce stereotypes** regarding women’s roles in relation to the family, the community and the environment. Such responses often *add to women’s already heavy unpaid work burdens* without conferring rights, resources and benefits.... [P]erspectives that view women narrowly as ‘sustainability saviors’ are evident in many areas, from the conservation of biodiversity, water and soils to building socially and environmentally sustainable services. Yet viewing women as sustainability saviors carries dangers.... Policies that are based on *stereotypical assumptions regarding women’s caring role* in the family,

¹¹ UNEP. 2014, 36. *Gender Heroes: From Grassroots to Global Action*. United Nations Environment Programme (booklet).

¹² UNEP. 2015, 5-6. *Gender Equality and the Environment*. United Nations Environment Programme (report).

¹³ UN Women. 2014, 16. *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Gender Equality and Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations (report).

¹⁴ UN. 2015. Sustainable Energy for All: Empowering Women. *UN Chronicle* 52 (3), December.

community and environment treat women as a homogeneous category. [I]ntensifying women's workloads to benefit the community and the environment can *entrench and worsen gender inequalities*.... Responses to climate change that address gender issues tend to *view women as victims* of climate impacts, or *entrench stereotypes and roles of women as natural carers* keeping their communities resilient or adopting low-carbon options."¹⁵

A particular passage is worth quoting more fully in assessing the discursive impacts of this approach to policymaking, which we will analyze more closely in the following section (emphasis added):

“[T]he view that *women should be harnessed as sustainability saviors* [is] based on the assumption that women are especially close to nature. Women-environment connections, especially in domestic and subsistence activities such as collecting fuelwood, hauling water and cultivating food, were often presented as if they were natural and universal, rather than as the product of particular social and cultural norms and expectations. Ensuing projects and policies often mobilized and instrumentalized women's labor, skills and knowledge, thereby *adding to their unpaid work without addressing whether they had the rights, voice and power to control project benefits*. A number of useful lessons emerge from this history for policymaking. First, policymakers should avoid making broad and stereotypical assumptions about women's and men's relationships with the environment. Rather, policies should respond to the specific social context and gender power relations. For instance, women's close involvement in gathering wild foods and

¹⁵ UN Women. 2014, 13, 24, 29. *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Gender Equality and Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations (report).

other forest products might reflect labor and land tenure relations and their lack of access to income with which to purchase food, rather than reflecting their closeness to nature.”¹⁶

Intersections of (In)justice

Against this backdrop, then, we observe a perverse tendency to look to those with ostensibly less power for signs of innovation and resilience. A clear example of this is the aforementioned view of women as “sustainability saviors” or “gender heroes” and the implications thereof. At root, the argument is that due to their closer connection to the material bases of life in many locales—including procuring food, fuel, water, and other basic goods—women have a unique capacity to address larger environmental challenges. While perhaps this can be empowering on some level, as noted, it also potentially reifies historical associations of gender and nature that are problematic, as well as essentializing the “caregiver” roles of women as being inherent, inevitable, and freely chosen. These constructions often overlook the more structural realms of political economy, decision-making power, cultural norms, and relative autonomy. By casting women as “saviors” or “heroes” for their ostensible environmental innovativeness and resilience, it can further reinforce these roles and increase the burdens on women to perform them. Further, these tendencies within environmentalism raise questions about the power dynamics between those in the role of “empowering” the communities at risk and those “being empowered.” In the context of where this analysis began, similar patterns therefore emerge in which the authentic narratives of those most directly impacted are being coopted by other actors. Whether or not the

¹⁶ Ibid. 28-29.

top-down narratives of women as “saviors” and “heroes” fundamentally challenge the intersectionality of their marginalization in the local and global contexts must be scrutinized to fully contemplate the potential and the limit of the “environmental justice frame.”¹⁷

The question, then, is how to engage these pressing environmental issues without resorting to either victimization or valorization. One starting point is to acknowledge the differential impacts of environmental issues more deeply and resist the tendency to universalize the capacity and/or responsibility for remediating them to those most acutely impacted. Affording people the space to define their own terms of engagement with environmental issues is critical, and whatever sense of empowerment that may flow from these choices can be self-selected rather than imposed. Thus, notions of “harnessing the power” of women (as referenced in the aforementioned 2014 UN publication on *Gender Heroes*) as paragons of sustainability raise implications that can only be harmonized with the tenets of justice if that power is freely given and contextualized within the unique experiences of individuals—rather than being categorically attributed by others: “Policies that are based on stereotypical assumptions regarding women’s caring role in the family, community and environment . . . ignore the vital intersections with other inequalities that shape women’s interests, knowledge, values, opportunities and capabilities. Power imbalances in gender relations, in the exercise of rights, access to and control of resources, or participation in decision-making, determine whether women’s actions and work translate into enhanced rights and capabilities, dignity and bodily integrity.”¹⁸

Despite some conceptual and pragmatic gains around these issues in recent years, the role played by factors including race and gender remains relatively undertheorized in the annals of

¹⁷ Čapek, Stella M. 1993. “The ‘Environmental Justice’ Frame: A Conceptual Discussion and Application.” *Social Problems* 40 (1): 5-24.

¹⁸ UN Women. 2014, 24. *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Gender Equality and Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations (report).

environmentalism. The legacy of environmental racism persists, evident not only through an analysis of dramatic events such as Hurricane Katrina but likewise in the accrued impacts of structural violence on economic outcomes, educational opportunities, policing and incarceration, and other critical issues. Ongoing effects of the colonization of indigenous communities can be seen in patterns of toxification, desertification, and displacement as registered in rates of impoverishment and negative health consequences. In much of the developing world women are challenged by environmental degradation, which can heighten the burdens of providing essential resources for their families and also serve to increase their exposure to violence. Historically, issues ranging from resource exploitation to the closure of the commons still reverberate for many peoples and communities around the globe.¹⁹ The list of such examples is very long, indicating the centrality of environmental issues to the search for justice.

Indeed, the confirmation of one of the core tenets of *environmental justice*—namely that those who contribute the least to crises are often impacted the most by them, skewed along preexisting lines of power and privilege—looms prominently in the context of contemporary ecological problems.²⁰ The extant cases of differential impacts appear in considerations of food deserts, post-disaster contexts, pipeline constructions, siting of toxic facilities, substandard living conditions, refugee encampments, and more. Unsurprisingly, environmental issues—from the lack of access to healthy food and clean water to resource conflicts and climate change—can intensify deeply rooted patterns of inequality and injustice that render vulnerable and/or marginalized communities even more so as existing challenges mount.²¹ The decades since the

¹⁹ Ammons, Elizabeth, and Modhumita Roy, eds. 2015. *Sharing the Earth: An International Environmental Justice Reader*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.

²⁰ Pellow, David Naguib, and Robert J. Brulle, eds. 2005. *Power, Justice, and the Environment: A Critical Appraisal of the Environmental Justice Movement*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

²¹ Bullard, Robert D. *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press.

advent of environmental justice have borne this out across myriad geographies, fostering an emerging cognizance of how these issues are deeply and unavoidably interconnected across both time and space.²²

Still, while the substantive aspects of such matters may be more widely understood as intersecting, less attention has been afforded to the patterns of interlocking injustice that illuminate the disparate lived experiences of environmental crises. In other words, a growing consciousness of issue-oriented integration does not necessarily equate with a more nuanced understanding of how this actually plays out in the lives of individuals and their communities: “The task now is to create movements that reflect not just the complexity of issues, but of people’s lives.”²³ The emerging paradigm of *intersectionality*, especially as it applies in the context of environmental justice, holds promise as a tool to further unpack both the impacts of and possibilities for meaningful engagement with socioecological challenges.²⁴ In brief, intersectionality inquires more deeply into how various factors of identity formation and attribution work together to yield differential frames of experience in a manner that exceeds the sum of its parts.²⁵ This is so at the macro and micro scales, whereby people who are collectively exposed to an environmental crisis will bear the impacts distinctively vis-à-vis other communities, and differentially within their society based on factors such as access to resources, power, education, and status.²⁶

²² Schlosberg, David. 2013. Theorizing Environmental Justice: The Expanding Sphere of Discourse. *Environmental Politics* 22 (1): 37-55.

²³ Moe, Kristin. Get Intersectional! (or, Why Your Movement Can’t Go It Alone). *YES! Magazine* (April 4). Accessed 2017. Available from <http://www.yesmagazine.org/planet/getintersectionalwhyyourmovementcantgoitalone>.

²⁴ Rodriguez, Majandra. 2015. Facing Climate Change Through Justice and Intersectionality. *350.org* (September 3). Accessed 2017. Available from <https://350.org/facingclimatechangethroughjusticeandintersectionality/>.

²⁵ Belalia, Henia. 2014. Intersectionality Isn’t Just a Win-Win: It’s the Only Way Out. *Waging Nonviolence* (May 27). Accessed: 2017. Available from <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/intersectionality-isnt-just-win-win-way/>

²⁶ Kaijser, Anna, and Annica Kronsell. 2014. Climate Change through the Lens of Intersectionality. *Environmental Politics* 23 (3): 417-33.

The core of this intersectional perspective is twofold, involving a more sophisticated integration of substantive issues, as well as a more nuanced understanding of differential perspectives and experiences in navigating those issues. Likewise, the pursuit of *justice* as a robust concept in social and environmental realms alike necessitates more direct contributions from those most impacted in order to realign baseline operations of power and participation. A potent mechanism for undertaking these efforts is the cultivation of pathways for engagement with pressing issues that highlight the substantive complexities and grounded voices of people situated in place. Rendering those stories and viewpoints more fully is beyond the scope of this piece, but the following frameworks may provide points of departure for further explorations.

Reclaiming the Narrative

As we consider ways to confront environmental crises consistent with this expansive vision of justice—and that do not perpetuate the imbalances of power and untenable dualisms that have fomented the crises in the first place—we are cognizant of the insights gleaned from others who have raised similar queries. As Phoebe Godfrey and Denise Torres have observed, “we can no longer continue to destructively enact Western ‘white’ patriarchal capitalist society’s ... conceptualization of a clear boundary between the ideological and the material, the social and the environmental, the human and the non-human, the observer and the observed, the word and the flesh.”²⁷ Thus, from a policymaking perspective, a critical question that has not been addressed adequately is whether “progress” as a function of development is possible without destroying the environment(s) upon which we are dependent and to which we are connected. In other words, is

²⁷ Godfrey, Phoebe, and Denise Torres. 2016, 1. *Systemic Crises of Global Climate Change: Intersections of Race, Class and Gender*. New York: Routledge.

“sustainable development” feasible at this juncture, or is it an atavistic concept that has already been coopted by essentialism and commercialization? “To break out of these cycles,” writes Toban Black, “it is crucial to support those who live on the frontlines [and] to tap into their proactive motivations, as well as their concrete experiences with higher risk conditions where environmental impacts may be the most apparent.”²⁸

Time may tell the full story about whether this will be sufficient to stem the tide of destabilization, but unfortunately the window of time is rapidly closing. What might be said at this juncture is that there are models of more participatory governance and development emerging that hold promise to empower people to address concrete issues in their particular communities—ones that are centered on the narratives of those most directly impacted by environmental crises, and that are reflective of trends embracing an intersectional view of justice, power, and ecology. As Alex Reid has observed in the context of disparate impacts from the environmental impacts of conflict: “The pervasiveness of women’s responsibility for environmental management hinges on a gendered division of labor, in which women are often disproportionately responsible for providing ‘subsistence’ products such as food, water and fuel.... Where women are identified as the primary managers of local resources, effective management and reform will remain incomplete and ineffective if a gendered lens is not considered.... [B]oth gender and the environment are cross-cutting issues that need more than fine words and inadequate resources.”²⁹ As we consider ways to move discursive overtures toward tangible outcomes, the following spheres may serve as points of engagement with this emerging perspective:

²⁸ Black, Toban. 2016, 181. *Race, Gender, and Climate Injustice: Dimensions of Social and Environmental Inequality*. In *Systemic Crises of Global Climate Change*. New York: Routledge.

²⁹ Reid, Alex. 2017. *Understanding Gender, Conflict, and the Environment*. *Toxic Remnants of War Project* (June 5). Accessed 2017. Available from <http://www.trwn.org/understanding-gender-conflict-and-the-environment/>

Desegregating Nature: We cannot separate environmental issues from the lived experiences of people. “To face the increasingly urgent challenges of global climate change, fresh-water shortages, persistent fossil-fuel dependence, cascading extinctions, and inequities behind the spread of poverty and food insecurity will require the best of human imagination and responsibility because, at end, they are moral crises.... My intent is not to paint a simplistic scene of victims and aggressors, with single proximate factors of cause and effect, but to recognize that the complexities and ambiguities of this nation’s multicultural past and present, and the ways in which American culture has used or impacted the Earth, cannot be separated from underlying values that have fed racism and systemic inequality.”³⁰ Numerous community-based environmental entities are cognizant of these realities, sometimes framing their work specifically with regard to the historical and contemporary landscapes in which these efforts occur. To take one such example, Soilful City (www.soilfulcity.com) in Washington, DC, emphasizes its urban gardening work as part of an emerging “Afro-ecology” that is informed by the realities of “African Diasporic culture” and that strives to reconnect “people and the land.”

Situated knowledge: Such interventions require understanding the context in which the production of knowledge and resources alike are connected to structures of power and politics. “From an intersectional understanding, how individuals relate to climate change depends on their positions in context-specific power structures based on social categorizations [that] should not be regarded as fixed; they always need to be understood in their specific historical and spatial context and as embedded in power patterns.... [A]n intersectional framework must go beyond naming categories to an analysis of how they are related to broader power relations, to politics

³⁰ Savoy, Lauret. 2011. *Desegregating Nature*. *Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built and Natural* 27. Accessed 2017. Available from <http://www.terrain.org/columns/27/savoy.htm>.

and institutional practices and to norms and symbolic representations.”³¹ Thus, we can discern compelling examples of how this looks in practice: “Whether it is indigenous women in the Amazon fighting corporate polluters and climate change or undocumented Latina domestic workers advocating for worker rights and dignity in California, women’s groups and networks are making links between unbridled capitalism, violence, and the erosion of human rights and destruction of the Earth.”³²

Planting Seeds: A potent illustration—which brought its founder a Nobel Peace Prize—demonstrates how these factors can be leveraged by people toward self-empowerment: “The Green Belt Movement (GBM) is an environmental organization that empowers communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods. GBM was founded by Professor Wangari Maathai in 1977 under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk further and further to get firewood for fuel and fencing. GBM encouraged the women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood, and receive a small monetary token for their work” (www.greenbeltmovement.org). “Then came the revolution. The women decided to do away with the professional approach to forestry and instead use their common sense! ... Twenty years down the road, the women have gained many skills and ... have become self-reliant in tree planting.”³³ The work of the GBM has taken place against

³¹ Kaijser, Anna, and Annica Kronsell. 2014. Climate Change through the Lens of Intersectionality. *Environmental Politics* 23 (3): 421-23.

³² Chitnis, Rucha. 2016. “How Women-Led Movements Are Redefining Power, from California to Nepal.” *YES! Magazine* (March 8). Accessed 2017. Available from <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peoplepower/howwomenledmovementsareredefiningpowerfromcaliforniatonepal20160308>.

³³ Maathai, Wangari. 2004, 27-28. *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*. New York: Lantern.

backdrop of colonialism and political conflict, striving from the outset “to integrate and advance the causes of environmental, women’s, and human rights,”³⁴ through synthesized approaches that recognized the intersectional nature of these issues. Indeed, as our analysis here indicates, the inherently intertwined nature of these spheres counsels that work must be done in all of them simultaneously if true gains are to be made in any of them.

Conclusion

The employment of engaged narratives in environmental movement work avoids the pitfalls of the simplistic competing narratives of the marginalized population as heroes or victims of climate change and environmental degradation. By intentionally and consciously activating local voices, especially those whose heightened risks of environmental hazards stem from structural injustices, the “engaging narratives” approach acknowledges that addressing environmental issues must simultaneously tackle the inherent intersectionality and systemic dimensions of the challenges, including pervasive gender, economic, and ethnic disparities that exist at all scales.³⁵ The deployment of these narratives thus becomes a way of amplifying the existing forces of resistance and struggle, without casting the people and places at the center of these issues as agency-less victims waiting to be empowered.³⁶ Such forms of “environmental justice storytelling,” as Donna Houston observes, can carry “diverse ideas along together to produce different environmental imaginaries (both good and bad) in and of a damaged world,” by valuing

³⁴ Nixon, Rob. 2011, 138. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³⁵ Reynolds, Kristin, and Nevin Cohen. 2016. *Beyond the Kale: Urban Agriculture and Social Justice Activism in New York City*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.

³⁶ Dickinson, Elizabeth. 2012. Addressing Environmental Racism Through Storytelling: Toward an Environmental Justice Narrative Framework. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5 (1): 57.

storytelling as much as the stories themselves.³⁷ Rather than reinforcing the storytellers' innovation or resilience against environmental injustices as the manifestation of their exotic otherness, the critically engaged narratives would illuminate the sense of a shared humanity across diverse experiences, and therefore emphasize the collective stake involved in tackling global environmental challenges.

The engaged narrative approach also serves as a reminder to broader environmental movements about the inherent privileges of the North in addressing global environmental issues, and offers a reflexive moment to acknowledge the power dynamics that pervade current dominant environmental movements across the globe. Similarly, we posit that exploring engaged narratives addresses the broader gender-environment intersections in the existing movement narratives that tend to situate both as powerless recipients of violence and exploitation. "The importance of gender in our understanding of the environment and conflict is often camouflaged," as Reid argues, and "failing to include gender in [policymaking] is a flawed approach from both an environmental and a human rights perspective."³⁸ Identifying and deploying narratives that counter this tendency can become a form of genuine empowerment in which notions of femininity and women's roles are fundamentally challenged while addressing the overarching environmental concerns.

The exemplars cited here are more than merely discursive in nature: they are about people situated in place struggling to sustain a viable foothold in this world, and likewise to point a way forward for all of us at the same time. It is a monumental task, spanning the particular and

³⁷ Houston, Donna. 2012. Environmental Justice Storytelling: Angels and Isotopes at Yucca Mountain, Nevada. *Antipode* 45 (2): 433.

³⁸ Reid, Alex. 2017. Understanding Gender, Conflict, and the Environment. *Toxic Remnants of War Project* (June 5). Accessed 2017. Available from <http://www.trwn.org/understanding-gender-conflict-and-the-environment/>

the universal, but it is, indeed, *essential* for the future of our species on this world. In this sense, “our demand is not for a return to a pristine past, real or imagined, or for a perfected utopia here and now. We seek the dismantling of unhealthy, oppressive, destructive technologies in favor of new technologies that foster autonomy and exist at the appropriate scale.... We seek a world premised on the mutuality of ‘human dignity and nature’s wholeness’, recognizing that we cannot attain one without the other.”³⁹ As scholar-activist Naomi Klein observes: “Either we fight for a future in which everyone belongs, starting with those being most battered by injustice and exclusion today, or we will keep losing. And there is no time for that. Moreover, when we make these connections among issues—climate, capitalism, colonialism, slavery—there is a kind of relief. Because it actually is all connected, all part of the same story.”⁴⁰ Connecting these issues, struggles, and stories in a non-superficial, non-exploitative manner offers a potential pathway toward addressing today’s critical challenges of environmental justice.

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³⁹ Amster, Randall. 2015, 189. *Peace Ecology*. New York: Routledge.

⁴⁰ Klein, Naomi. 2016. We Are Hitting the Wall of Maximum Grabbing. *The Nation* (December 16). Accessed 2017. Available from <https://www.thenation.com/article/intersectionality-is-the-only-path-forward-for-the-climate-movement/>

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