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Environmental justice and rural studies: A critical conversation and invitation to collaboration

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Loka Ashwood and Katherine MacTavish have done an outstanding job of editing a collection of papers by a group of scholars who have produced groundbreaking work on myriad rural dimensions of environmental justice scholarship and politics. To my knowledge, this special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* is the first of its kind, and it is truly timely. These contributors bring a range of research methods, epistemologies, disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and emphases on a broad and varied set of landscapes and geographies unlike any project I have seen in the field of EJ studies. Ashwood and MacTavish's introduction to this volume offers a deeply insightful conceptual framework through which to view the links among rurality, democracy, inequality, and environmental justice. Their analysis of de Tocqueville's concept *tyranny of the majority* is momentous and offers a productively unsettling framework for thinking through the problem of nation-states with respect to future scholarship and politics focused on environmental (in)justice in rural, urban and other settings. In what follows, I offer my thoughts on the significance of each of these papers and the volume as a whole.

As a number of the authors in this special issue point out, the rural dimensions of environmental justice studies have long been present, but generally only in the background, rarely foregrounded, centered, or taken seriously as a social, ecological, cultural, economic, and political category that shapes EJ struggles everyday. For example, many of the early environmental justice movement battlegrounds in the U.S. took place in rural communities like Warren County, North Carolina and Kettleman City, California. But the dominant framing of those cases was around racial and class inequalities, while the spatial relationships and tensions between urban and rural communities was rarely sufficiently theorized. This special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* features innovative and path-breaking scholarship that seeks to bring the rural to the center of EJ studies and engage this category in all of its complexity.

I often describe myself as an environmental sociologist, as do a number of senior environmental justice studies scholars. Environmental sociology emerged as a response to the increasing evidence that urbanization and industrialization were producing severe ecological consequences around the globe. Environmental sociology is a field that owes much of its origins to rural sociology and rural studies and has, until recently, struggled to gain a foothold at the center of the discipline of Sociology. Ironically, one of the fields that arguably gave environmental sociology a much-needed shot in the arm and heightened visibility in recent years—Environmental Justice Studies—has also contributed to shifting its attention away from rural spaces toward urban centers. That would not be a concern if EJ studies scholars were paying serious and close attention to the ways that urban and rural spaces are inextricably linked and bound up in intricate and highly uneven and unequal processes. But that focus has been largely absent in the literature. Interestingly, a close relative of EJ studies is Food Justice studies—an emergent field that brings together many of the practices we traditionally associate with rural spaces such as agriculture, food production, and distribution with urban community politics (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Anguelovski, 2014). Through food justice work, people from urban communities of color are collaborating with people of color and white allies in both urban and rural settings across this country to reconnect with rural spaces, traditions, and knowledge, thereby blurring the lines between the urban and rural, and consumer and producer. Increasingly, EJ studies is taking a closer look at Food Justice Studies for direction on this point and could be a critically important window and pathway for bridging rural studies and EJ scholarship (as the contributing authors to this special issue have done so well).

To be fair, there are a number of notable EJ studies that are based on rural or largely rural areas that merit some mention here. Bullard (2000) classic *Dumping in Dixie* chronicles the struggles of a number of African American communities in the Southern U.S., including Emelle, Alabama; Alsen, Louisina; and Institute, West Virginia, and Timmons Roberts and Melissa Toffolon-Weiss's (2001) *Chronicles from the Environmental Justice Frontline* centers its analysis on several rural EJ struggles in the state of Louisiana. Recent research on EJ and water management conflicts in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region of California (Sze et al., 2010) and on pesticide drift in and around agricultural communities of California (Harrison, 2011) reveal that basic access to safe water, soil, and air is not enjoyed by many communities of color in rural America. Historian Richard Mizelle's (2014) *Backwater Blues*, is a re-reading of the 1927 Mississippi Flood through an EJ lens. That flood killed untold numbers of people and revealed the depths of

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environmental racism directed at black people by a white supremacist state and its regulatory apparatus in the Mississippi delta region—a rural space if ever there was one. Studies by scholars examining the resource wars and ongoing colonization of indigenous peoples' lands in North America are almost entirely centered in rural environs (Gedicks, 2001; LaDuke, 1999). Research on the EJ struggles of Chicana/o and Hispana/o communities in the American Southwest to maintain access to land, water, and cultural resources also locates these dynamics in rural spaces (Peña, 1999; Pulido, 1996). And writings by scholars studying EJ conflicts in Appalachian coal communities suggest a critical interest in exploring environmental justice challenges in what is often thought of as quintessentially rural America (Bell, 2016; R. Scott, 2010b). In a wonderful book edited by Sarah Neal and Julian Agyeman (2006), they and their colleagues explore the intersections of ethnicity, nation, and space, and how the whiteness of Britain's rural areas—its countryside—is being challenged by multicultural transformations affecting the rest of the nation as well, resulting in new imaginings and practices of "rural citizenship" (Neal and Agyeman, 2006). Finally, echoing much of the foundational work in EJ studies, Mei Mei Evans (2002) writes about the ways in which "Nature"—in the form of wild, rural spaces—is often a site of foreboding, dread, exclusion, and violence for people of color, women, and queer folk. For many of these populations, "Nature" is not only a "masculinist social construction, but one that is racist and heterosexist as well" (Evans, 2002, p. 191). Having noted these outstanding works and their clear relevance to the intersection between EJ studies and rural studies, I am compelled to point out that—with the important exception of Neal and Agyeman (2006)—the concept of rurality and rural studies as a field are simply not at the heart of this literature. Thus the need for the work featured in this volume is clear and it is long overdue.

A few observations are in order to place this volume in a broader context. The encroachment of urbanization and industrialization on rural spaces in the U.S. and Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries was a dynamic that shaped the shift from largely instrumentalist to sentimentalist views of nonhuman animals and ecosystems, giving rise to environmental and animal welfare movements. These processes continue today with even greater intensity, sparking a range of emotions and reactions from despair and nihilism to radical ecological politics. In the 21st century, the majority of humans reside in urban areas and this raises urgent questions about what this mean for rural studies and the very concept of rurality, to say nothing of what it means for the changing character of cities (including megacities and global cities) and the core concepts underlying urban studies. Given that urban and rural communities are inextricably linked through, for example, shared ecosystems, production, consumption, migration, family ties and myriad other relationships, one might ask whether the rural/urban divide is a dualism or binary that has been blurred to the point that we might be better off questioning the distinction. But the distinction is real because, among other reasons, it serves to structure our current daily lives and future possibilities around this ever changing but persistent dualism. But like other dualisms, this one also creates oppositional thinking, relationships, and hierarchies that serve a particular set of interests and disadvantage others.

As rural communities face threats associated with environmental injustice, extractivism, mining, pesticide drift, nuclear power, prison construction, hydroelectric dams, political and economic marginalization, and militarized state violence, it would appear that the integrity and future of rural spaces has never been at greater risk. Rural-urban socioecological tensions are also on full display—if we know to look for it—when human migration flows move from rural areas to urban centers within and across national borders, as we have seen in the U.S. Mexico region and in China. Immigration and nativist politics frequently flare up and intersect with environmental politics when national and urban/rural divides are threatened and crossed. The reasons for paying closer attention to the intersections between rurality and environmental injustice are too many to list here, so I will now consider the significance of each of the papers in the volume.

1. Comments on the papers in this volume

In Masterman-Smith et al.'s paper (this volume), they begin with the observation that EJ-related research and governmental policy in Australia have been, at best, "patchy and thin." This is despite the fact that mining and large-scale animal agriculture (e.g., broiler farms and feed lots) are major economic sectors in that nation, have clear negative impacts on marginalized communities and ecosystems, and show little signs of abatement. Rural communities in Australia face environmental hazards like noise, smoke, pesticide drift, water pollution, land grabs, and the destruction of indigenous and non-indigenous cultural resources by these industries. In response, the environmental justice movement in Australia is organizing and has been impressive in its topical and geographic scope. But the urban-rural divide persists and rears its head in the form of the lack of procedural justice for many rural residents because legal services, the courts, and tribunals tend to be concentrated in the cities and so are the most politically empowered decision makers. Thus, those officials are often far removed from the everyday realities of rural environmental injustice challenges. The result is that the environmental hazards facing rural people are out of sight and out of mind for urban-based policy makers, and so are the rural residents themselves. This paper's command of the spatial relationships that structure and facilitate environmental injustices is rare and is an example of how EJ politics in rural communities can serve as a model for thinking through connections and disconnections that make global EJ movement organizing particularly challenging and rewarding.

Malin and DeMaster's study (this volume) of EJ conflicts in Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale region highlights the productive and troubling linkages between environmental injustice in rural communities and intersectoral natural resource dependence. The dynamics unfolding in this context are complex and revealing of how vulnerabilities across economic sectors can provide affected communities with both benefits and troubling risks. Small and mid-sized farmers who accept deals to have companies extract natural gas via hydraulic fracturing under their land receive financial gains but generally do so because farming has been such a volatile and risky business. Furthermore, the pollution and public health threats that result from natural gas extraction often prove to be worthy of major concerns. The "devil's bargain" farmers strike produces money in their dwindling bank accounts, accompanied by procedural inequities around negotiating and enforcing lease agreements and the environmental risks that come with unconventional natural gas operations. While many EJ scholars assume that land ownership might strengthen the bargaining and political power of community residents, this study demonstrates that this is often not the case—that meaningful participation in decision making about natural gas operations is elusive for farmers who own the land on which these practices take place because they are unprepared for the pressure and outright bullying that corporations bring to bear on them. That is a hard lesson experienced by many indigenous communities around the globe as well and this paper's findings are therefore relevant across many cultural and geographic landscapes. This study's emphasis on energy production in agricultural contexts also brings to mind a parallel ongoing debate about the wisdom of using agricultural resources to produce agro/biofuels instead of food. Global hunger and in rural America