

Framing Environmental Justice: From American to Global Perspectives

By

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Abstract

This dissertation contests the idea that environmental justice discourse emerges solely from the United States. It creates dialogue between texts that represent a traditional American environmental justice frame and those that depict situations of environmental injustice outside of U.S. borders. It identifies eight coordinates that are crucial components of what can be considered environmental justice discourse. These characteristics become a rubric for establishing a traveling theory of environmental justice and include: issues of scale, types of knowledge and the institutions that produce it, anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives, realist and constructivist representations, individual and societal responsibilities, identity constructions like race and class, particularist and totalizing representations, and genre considerations. Analysis of Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day*, Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* reveals that certain coordinates that comprise environmental justice discourse are more fraught than others. I focus on the role of the American activist as reader or character in the texts and how the authors emphasize the coordinates to varying degrees. I argue that the American figure's ideology transforms when she develops an environmental double-consciousness where she becomes aware of how she sees herself but also how others view her and her position in the world. The texts reveal that scalar considerations and the positions the texts take on types of knowledge and the institutions that produce it represent the greatest divergence among environmental justice representations and become crucial elements for differentiating the ways various genres and texts from different national contexts fulfill themselves as environmental justice discourse.

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Introduction

The triumph of the written word is often attained when the writer achieves union and trust with the reader, who then becomes ready to be drawn into unfamiliar territory, walking in borrowed literary shoes so to speak, toward a deeper understanding of self or society, or of foreign peoples, cultures, and situations

--Chinua Achebe

You write in order to change the world ... if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it

--James Baldwin

Achebe and Baldwin speak to the power the written word has to transform the way people perceive and potentially act. This fundamental aspect of what literature can do becomes especially significant for writers who represent people and places that face situations of environmental injustice. In fiction and nonfiction, print and film, writers and directors aim to change their audience's relationship with the world through textual representation. The ability to put multiple voices in dialogue with one another represents one of the most compelling characteristics of literature, and it is the feature that offers the most promise for developing a deeper understanding of self and others. The potential to alter the way people and places are valued through exposure to additional knowledge or different perspectives resonates with Achebe's message and reflects the task undertaken by the writers and director examined here.

This project is positioned at the intersection between literary production and situations of environmental injustice worldwide. It poses two central questions: how might someone transform from mainstream environmental views to environmental justice perspectives; and how does an American environmental justice frame look when it is represented in contexts outside of the United States? To answer these questions, this project starts with an analysis of Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* to establish a recent example that uses an American environmental

justice frame to challenge mainstream environmental views. Lee's framing of environmental justice is then compared to other authors' representations of American figures and readers-viewers in situations outside of the United States. When one puts the traditions of an American environmental justice frame in dialogue with representations of movements outside of the United States, similar issues emerge but the degree to which the examples evoke each issue varies depending on the scale of the situations. In light of the political, economic, and ideological dominance of the United States post-1945, an examination of how authors represent American figures in their writings provides an opportunity to generate additional strategies for movements against injustices. In short, analysis of the similarities and differences in literary representations about environmental movements around the world produces new modes of resistance and effective means for struggling against injustices on multiple scales.

Mainstream Environmental Perspectives

Many scholars examine the genealogy of mainstream environmentalism in the United States and the dominance of those perspectives in ecocriticism. The value placed on wilderness conservation and species preservation, including the ideas that underpin a traditional wilderness aesthetic—the separation between nature and culture—remain prevalent in American scholarship. Mainstream activist movements in the United States have been influenced by and been a product of the scholarly attention devoted to certain texts and representations of nature over others. Rob Nixon observes,

the environmental justice movement, the branch of American environmentalism that held the greatest potential for connecting outward internationally to issues of slow violence, the environmentalism of the poor, and imperial

socioenvironmental degradation remained marginal to the dominant purview of environmentalism that was becoming institutionalized through the greening of the humanities. (235)

Nixon's statement emphasizes how environmental justice movements have existed on the margins in relation to mainstream environmentalism. The texts examined in this project challenge American readers-viewers to consider environmental issues from a justice perspective. The authors and director shift conceptions of the environment from ones that emphasize a separation between nature and culture to ones that understand a socioecological model of justice. They question approaches that consider technological solutions as the only viable responses to environmental problems, and they position American characters and readers-viewers as malleable and dynamic subjects who can be shaped by imagination. The result is an environmental consciousness that negotiates the role the United States plays as part of global problems but also the hope it represents as an important element in global redress. The community of justice extends across national borders and emphasizes dialogue and cooperation as opposed to a center-to-periphery environmental imperialism.

An American Environmental Justice Frame

An environmental justice frame has a presence in current American ecocriticism—the academic study of literary representations of the environment—but it remains outside the dominant discourse of mainstream environmentalism that tends to separate nature and culture and that privileges technological and scientific expertise. Environmental justice is concerned with connections between social designations and the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits, and, as Nixon notes, it represents the strand of environmentalism most equipped to

converse with global movements. The American tradition of environmental justice as a political movement, field of academic study, and policy principle emerged during the 1980s although the roots of the contemporary movement are linked to the Civil Rights efforts of the 1960s. Joan Martinez-Alier associates the American environmental justice tradition with instances of “environmental racism,” which he argues are mainly United States and possibly South African concepts.¹ The history of these movements includes “many cases of local environmental activism in the USA, some with a hundred years’ roots in the many struggles for health and safety in mines and factories, perhaps also in complaints against pesticides in southern cotton fields, and certainly in the struggle against toxic waste at Love Canal in upstate New York lead by Lois Gibbs” (Martinez-Alier 171).²

In *Environmental Justice: Concepts, Evidence and Politics* [2012], Gordon Walker outlines seven characteristics of an American environmental justice frame: it emphasizes a politics of race; it focuses on questions of justice for people; it focuses on siting of waste and risk, and, recently, on access to environmental “goods/benefits” in addition to environmental “bads”; it emphasizes distributive justice; it assigns blame and responsibility to “industry and corporate actors, and on the institutionalised (and racist) practices of the state”; it focuses its struggle within the borders of the United States; and it is rooted in social movements, the work of grassroots activists, and the work of academics (20-23). Walker points out that there has been some evolution of these characteristics in recent years. For the purpose of this project, these criteria will be used to evaluate how environmental justice is traditionally framed within an

¹ Ramachandra Guha explains that Martinez-Alier changed his name from Juan to Joan, which causes much confusion for bibliographers and graduate students (29).

² The texts in this project challenge Martinez-Alier’s assessment that environmental racism applies only to the United States and South Africa by demonstrating how racism operates on a global scale.

American context and then compare that to characteristics observed in movements against injustices that are represented in places outside the borders of the United States.

Similar to the field of ecocriticism as a whole, the first incarnations of an American environmental justice frame focus on issues and use vocabularies that resonate within the borders of the United States. During the 1990s, scholars began to recognize environmental justice movements worldwide, but even recent scholarship, like Walker's, re-centers environmental justice and its vocabularies as American phenomena. In his book, Walker includes a list of 37 countries where he argues the language of environmental justice has traveled from the United States across the globe. Walker's assertion that environmental justice framing emerged from the United States can be challenged by numerous scholars, like Ramachandra Guha, who have traced the history of environmentalism outside Western nations. Guha states, "The study of environmentalism worldwide has been beset by different kinds of chauvinism...the chauvinisms most obviously in operation are the *national* and the *ideological*, these often operating in conjunction" (9). Other scholars point out the Western prejudice in genealogies of environmental movements. In the introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley state, "we've drawn from earlier works in postcolonial literature to suggest that the global south has contributed to an ecological imaginary and discourse of activism and sovereignty that is not derivative of the Euro-American environmentalism of the 1960s and 70s" (8). DeLoughrey and Handley explain that the movements of the Global South share conceptions of nature and have values, priorities, and beliefs similar to the American strand of environmental justice but these movements emerged independently of that tradition. Guha's overview of environmentalism in India and the activism described by Ken Saro-Wiwa in *Genocide in Nigeria* indicate that similar movements for environmental and social justice were occurring

simultaneously outside of the United States. Common demands for justice, equality, and healthy living spaces run across these movements, but often the vocabularies and strategies employed differ for specific locations. The history of the land and people unique to each place influences the discourses used and the issues represented.

Challenges Facing Environmental Justice Movements

Environmental justice movements worldwide face numerous challenges when appealing for support. Those challenges include how movements can transform people's understanding of issues to incorporate socioecological perspectives and how movements can represent local, particular situations in ways that appeal to global movements for justice. Culturally entrenched ideas about nature and the complex interdependence of economic and political systems explain why these transformations are simultaneously so important and difficult.

Many scholars have noted America's disproportionate contribution to injustices around the globe, which stems from economic policies, fossil-fuel dependence, and consumption practices that place the United States as the foremost perpetrator of environmental stresses. For example, in *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell explains the concept of environmental double-think as a split consciousness where "Awareness of the potential gravity of environmental degradation far surpasses the degree to which people effectively care about it. For decades it has been reckoned a major issue, but it has modified citizenly behavior only at the edges. Americans have become more energy-conscious but remain consumption-addicted" (4). On the individual level, environmental double-think can have incremental effects, like using gallons of gas to drive hundreds of miles to a National Park; but when it is magnified to the country as a whole, its effects can be disastrous. Nixon illustrates the ramifications, "Aldo

Leopold's sobering reminder of what else it means, in environmental terms, to be an American: "When I go birding in my Ford, I am devastating an oil field, and re-electing an imperialist to get me rubber" (240). Being confronted with inconsistencies or hypocrisies can cause individuals, and nations, to become defensive. J.R. McNeill describes the reluctance of the United States to budge at international conferences devoted to environmental and climate issues: "Although the United States became more amenable to international agreements after the late 1980s, it tried hard to see that in these accords its ox wasn't gored. At the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Americans made it clear that U.S. 'lifestyles' were not up for negotiation" (353-4).

As the global power in the post-1945 world economically, politically, militarily, and ideologically, the United States occupies a paradoxical position as creator of injustices and as a society readily equipped to tackle inequalities that contribute to injustices. While American lifestyles have magnified the environmental stresses in the world today, the country's democratic principles have fostered activist movements at home, where previously ignored or unheard voices are given audience. Activists from around the world recognize the promise of encouraging those principles, and the economic power of American-backed organizations means movements often want support from the United States. But, if lack of awareness and contradictions in behavior by American citizens are part of the environmental problems that face the world today, then what, if anything, can be done to resolve the inconsistencies? The texts in this project represent some potential positive effects of transformed American characters and readers-viewers who adjust their ideology and behavior based on new information and evidence. The authors represent some of the limitations of an American environmental justice frame and

simultaneously suggest potential ways for expanding the frame to incorporate global perspectives.

Transforming American Characters, Readers, and Viewers

The texts in this project produce American characters and readers-viewers who are amenable to transformation when they encounter alternative perspectives and their own contradictions. The character's knowledge about environmental practices and social considerations is challenged to imagine a different relationship to nature, the environment, and the local and global community. The task these writers undertake is to offer a counter-frame that decenters the American figure's perspective about herself and the environment, which encourages her to embrace global environmental justice perspectives. This project contextualizes an American environmental justice frame and demonstrates how vocabularies in addition to "environmental racism" are incorporated into the way situations are represented.³ This project analyzes how writers transform their American characters from mainstream environmental perspectives to environmental justice viewpoints *and* how they decenter their American figures to recognize what can be learned from movements outside of the United States. Therefore, the roles the American character and reader-viewer play when put into conversation with locally specific movements are of particular interest.

The focus on figures and readers-viewers from the United States does not intend to reify an American dominance in environmental ideas but instead aims to show how vocabularies and

³ According to Gordon Walker, the first use of the phrase "environmental racism" can be attributed to Benjamin Chavis in 1994 (66).

strategies used worldwide can inform and transform American traditions.⁴ The goal of this project is create dialogue across communities and national boundaries by examining how authors position characters, readers, and specific situations in relation to issues that constitute environmental justice. Global environmental justice frames resist a singular definition, and the comparative methodology driving this project provides the opportunity for dialogue among texts and theoretical traditions.

This project responds to calls within ecocriticism by scholars like Rob Nixon, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, George Handley, and Byron Caminero-Santangelo, among others, to look beyond the borders of the United States for ecocritical texts and perspectives. It contributes to the growing scholarship in transnational ecocriticism, and through an analysis of the framing, claims-making, and evidence used by the authors and director examined here patterns and differences across particular situations are identified, which construct a bridge between an American tradition of environmental justice and global perspectives. These literary representations of environmental justice frames imagine potential avenues for larger social transformation while simultaneously respecting the local, particular focus that resides at the heart of environmental justice movements.

Environmental Justice and Literary Representation

⁴ Guha argues that American environmental movements are not as universal as they assume in, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique,” which criticizes Deep Ecology: “My essay offered four main arguments: that the anthropocentric/biocentric distinction, so beloved of environmental philosophers and environmental activists, was of little help in understanding the dynamics of ecological degradation; that the most serious environmental problems worldwide were over-consumption and militarism, both of which deep ecology ignored; that deep ecology was in essence an elaboration of the American wilderness movement; and that in other cultures ‘radical’ environmentalism expressed itself very differently. The last two charges gave most offence, for they challenged the claim of deep ecology to be a philosophy and program of truly universal significance” (*How Much Should a Person Consume?* 26-7).

Environmental justice is a political and ecological movement, but it is also a cultural movement, “interested in issues of ideology and representation” (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 9). Literary representation can have material effects and by transforming the way environmental issues are represented, the possibility exists for changing people’s relationship with each other and the places they live. T. V. Reed raises the question of what role representation can play in environmental justice movements: “How can literature and criticism further efforts of the environmental justice movement to bring attention to ways in which environmental degradation and hazards unequally affect poor people and people of color?” (149). He poses this question in a chapter of *The Environmental Justice Reader*. Among the first anthologies to specifically address environmental justice in the field of American ecocriticism, *The Reader* is dominated by examples from the United States. Little cross-cultural conversation exists, and a traditional American environmental justice frame is reflected in the anthology as a whole.

Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein published *The Environmental Justice Reader* in 2002. Robert Bullard has been writing about environmental racism since the early 1990s, and *The Environmental Justice Reader* extends on the work done by pioneering scholars like him. The anthology represents a shift in ecocriticism toward broader understandings of what constitutes the environment, environmental writing, and environmental issues. The anthology considers its perspective international in scope, but the collection as a whole reveals an American perspective on issues that constitute injustices: the definition of environmental justice provided by the editors emphasizes race, class, and the siting of toxins while paying much less attention to gender, ethnicity, age, caste, and other social considerations. Adamson, Evans, and Stein define environmental justice as:

the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment. We define the environment, in turn, as the places in which we live, work, play, and worship. Environmental justice initiatives specifically attempt to redress the disproportionate incidence of environmental contamination in communities of the poor and/or communities of color, to secure for those affected the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture. As members of marginalized communities have mobilized around issues of environmental degradation affecting their families, communities, and work sites, they have illuminated the crucial intersections between ecological and social justice concerns. (4)

Adamson, Evans, and Stein consider environmental justice a concept that encompasses issues of race and class, but the essays in the anthology overwhelmingly privilege racial designations without a nuanced discussion of class issues separate from racial ones. In the same anthology, Julie Sze provides another, similar definition: “Environmental justice is a political movement concerned with public policy issues of environmental racism, as well as a cultural movement interested in issues of ideology and representation” (163). The racial focus is explicit in Sze’s definition and helps substantiate why Martinez-Alier insists on another designation to describe the distribution of environmental injustices on a global scale. Martinez-Alier and other scholars use “environmentalism of the poor” to refer to movements that struggle against social and environmental injustices. He argues that the American frame’s emphasis on environmental racism leads to a focus on minority rights that do not apply necessarily to the same extent in the rest of the world.

Similar to Martinez-Alier, Guha differentiates between environmentalism of the poor and environmentalism of the affluent, or the differences between environmentalisms of need and luxury. The emphasis on economic status separate from racial considerations by scholars writing about movements outside of the United States suggests that a shift in American environmental justice scholarship may be necessary before it can be attuned to global considerations. Susan Comfort argues that scholarship needs “an analysis that highlights the material connections among different sites of environmental degradation and economic exploitation but that also emphasizes the particular cultural idioms and local complexities of these struggles” (Comfort 243). Comfort’s suggestion to consider economic issues based on particular local circumstances distances an environmental justice frame from a race-only focus and aligns with Bullard who points out, “environmental racism is just one form of environmental injustice” (qtd. in Buell, *Future* 117) and Buell who declares: “the greater the push toward framing the issue of environmental justice on a global scale, . . . the greater may be the tendency to think of racism as a frequent but not ubiquitous cause of environmental injustice” (*Future* 117). Buell and Comfort mention the importance of environmental justice scholarship that brings out issues from local to global scales. The method of analysis in this project shows what an American environmental justice tradition looks like when it shifts from a nationally-specific context to one that engages with situations worldwide. The project begins to map traditions outside of the United States and puts them in dialogue with the appeals, strategies, and vocabularies that have been used within an American context.

Transnational Ecocriticism

Other scholars engage in transnational and postcolonial ecocriticism, and this project aligns with those theoretical approaches. In their recent collection on African literature, Byron

Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers challenge the American and Western-based dominance of environmentalism and argue for attention to places and texts that have been neglected. Similar to Caminero-Santangelo and Myers, DeLoughrey and Handley call for “engaging broader contexts” (10) than the Anglo-American and national framework that currently dominates the field. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* [2011], Nixon analyzes a variety of global texts, fiction and nonfiction, to bring attention to the class disparity between environmentalism in Western and Northern nations and the environmentalism of the poor in the Global South. He is concerned with the displacement of pollution and environmental burdens onto those who contribute least to the problems. Ultimately, Nixon is interested in how the writer-activist represents slow violence—cumulative and exponential disasters that star nobody—as a means for developing a politics of commitment and transnational ethics of place. Three of the texts examined in this project are the same ones Nixon treats, and both Nixon and I attend to the textual and visual appeals employed by the writer-activist. While Nixon focuses on how to represent slow violence in literary and media forms, my concern lays with the way the writer-activist crafts an American figure and reader-viewer as a means for encouraging transnational dialogue between American and global environmentalisms. DeLoughrey and Handley state, “ecocritical discourses are ‘traveling theories’ rather than national products, and are irreducible to one geographical, national, or methodological origin” (16). Their assertion reinforces the importance of frames that can continually evolve to incorporate deeper understandings of people, places, and cultures.

Three of the texts examined in this project have attracted scholarly attention in the field of postcolonial ecocriticism: Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *A Month and a Day*, Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*, the focus of

chapter one, has received little attention in literary scholarship in general and even less through the lens of ecocriticism. All four texts feature an American character or target an American reader-viewer. The American does not understand yet an environmental justice perspective *or* does not fully grasp how others see her and her position in the world. The writers position introspective examinations of the roles Americans play in local situations as crucial for long-term ideological and systemic changes to occur. Ultimately, the authors and director represent situations that challenge previously held beliefs about what counts as an environmental issue and/or what role Americans should play in foreign movements for socioecological justice.

Characteristics of American Characters, Readers, and Viewers

For the purpose of this project's analysis, there are certain attitudes, beliefs, and values that are characteristic of the American figure and reader-viewer: the figure is not a Deep Green environmentalist; nor is he a far-right political conservative who denies evolution and climate change. Rather, the figure possesses a mainstream environmental consideration for places and species within and outside the borders of the United States. Reverence for nonhumans, particularly endangered species that fit a certain aesthetic sensibility aligns with her ideas about what nature entails and why it needs to be saved. She leans to the left along the political spectrum, is economically middle-to-upper class, possesses a disposition that makes her open to conversation with others and receptive to amending her position on issues based on new information. This figure is a prime candidate for adjusting her views to include a concern for the people who are burdened by environmental practices and policies. In some ways, she has similarities with the citizen Rachel Carson envisioned writing to in *Silent Spring*: "By acquiescing in an act that can cause such suffering to a living creature, who among us is not diminished as a human being?" (100).

In some cases the figure lacks understanding of how others view her and her country's role in the world. The figure either understands nature as consisting largely of areas untouched, or barely touched, by humans *or* she fails to grasp how those outside of the United States view her and her role in providing aid and support. These conceptions come out of certain traditions in American history, literature, and activism. The authors emphasize how her ideology affects the way she sees herself and the environment, and they craft key moments in the texts that model how she might break out of a solely national perspective on issues and add global perspectives to her activism. These texts challenge the American figure's sense of comfort and tap into her desire to right the wrongs of the world. They reimagine for the American figure the idea that humans are *a part of* nature rather than *apart from* nature.

Political ecologists Richard Peet, Paul Robbins, and Michael Watts address how power operates on and in the subject, and their ideas are relevant to the American figure described in this project. The exercise of power internally produces a certain kind of subject, and the American figure produced in the texts here has internalized certain activities, identities, and attitudes from society (32-33). The way power functions in and on subjects is important because of the role American hegemony plays nationally and internationally. This power has created the figure through American traditions, values, and beliefs, and the authors examined here must transform the subject to consider alternative perspectives. The authors expose the figure to counter narratives so she can imagine a different relationship to nature, environment, and community; one that is more globally expansive and culturally inclusive. Literary representation serves as a means to transform ideologies, but the operation of power and embeddedness of certain discursive frames explain why transformation is so difficult.

The writers examined in this project, like Carson, pose moral questions that resonate with socially-conscious individuals. This is not to suggest that these texts completely exclude readers-viewers who do not fit the characteristics outlined above, but instead it argues that these texts craft American characters that appeal to those who are receptive to considering new perspectives. The polyvocal composition of the texts encourages a way of reading-viewing that contests dominant narratives and proposes alternative ones. Similarities among pivotal scenes in the texts include emotionally-charged moments of misunderstanding, mistranslation, and misrecognition. The transformation is difficult, and the American figure confronts both how she positions herself in the world and how America as a country positions itself on the global stage.

Environmental Justice Issues

There are ways that environmental justice perspectives differ from other forms of environmentalism. This project identifies eight issues that constitute environmental justice: realist and constructivist representation, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, scientific expertise and local knowledge, questions of scale, personal moralism and social transformation, totalizing discourse and particularist representation, environmental racism and environmentalism of the poor, and questions of form. All of the texts in this project represent these issues, but they do not evoke them to the same extent. The different degree of emphasis brings attention to the need for flexibility in environmental justice frames. The various ways the authors and director position the American figure and reader-viewer in relation to these issues challenge how effectively an American environmental justice frame converses with global perspectives. Ultimately, the texts reveal the strengths and limitations of an American environmental justice frame when it travels, encounters other traditions of environmentalism, and is viewed from other perspectives. The first chapter looks at Lee's *When the Levees Broke* to establish a recent example that uses an

American environmental justice frame. The subsequent chapters produce dialogue between that tradition and its representation outside the borders of the United States.

The first issue, realist and constructivist representation has been significant since the beginning of ecocritical scholarship. It deals with discursive renderings of the environment and the material reality of what those descriptions represent. In an environmental justice frame, the difference between approaching a text from the realist perspective of its ability to capture the natural world versus the constructivist perspective of the cultural identities that affect the crafting of that world once it is put into language is far less controversial than it once was in the field of ecocriticism when nature writing and poetry were the dominant textual examples. Constructivist analysis—how class, race, gender, ethnicity, caste, and other social factors relate to the human and nonhuman environment—is necessary for an environmental justice reading, and this project proceeds with that approach, while recognizing the material reality of what is being represented. Julie Sze summarizes what an approach that moves beyond either/or can bring out, “The destabilization of what is real in the text is not an escape of ‘real’ issues, but of a realist and singular interpretation of time, events, and peoples. This destabilization expands our understanding of how the current battles [...] are linked to past injustices” (170).⁵ This method for reading texts provides insight into the ways different representations have affected how certain humans, nonhumans, and places are valued, which in turn influences the respect afforded to them and the policies enacted for actual material situations. Caminero-Santangelo argues that all literary texts “are mediated by ideological configurations and the political relationships that

⁵ Scholars who are interested in the merging of ecocritical and postcolonial approaches to texts outline additional ways of thinking about this tension. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin explain what bringing the two fields into conversation with one another can offer, “What the postcolonial/ecocritical alliance brings out, above all, is the need for a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment—one that requires attention, in turn, to the cultural politics of representation as well as to those more specific ‘processes of mediation [...] that can be recuperated for anti-colonial critique’” (12).

generate them” (214). His reading of two Nadine Gordimer novels connects how people conceive of nature to how they conceive of themselves and their position in the world (225). People’s relationship with the environment is constructed by their conception of nature and by extension their sense of self, which is “at least partly determined by professional and other social factors” (225). The texts in this project highlight what identities are being projected more or less than others in situations of environmental injustices, and the ways the authors position different subjects in the texts reinforce the notion that a character’s or reader-viewer’s reality is limited and constructed by her subject position.

Similar to the realist and constructivist representation discussion, the anthropocentric and ecocentric issue seems more controversial within ecocriticism in general than in environmental justice frames. The debate centers on how to prioritize human and nonhuman nature. An environmental justice perspective implies a prioritization of the lives of contemporary humans. While some critics have accused the field of being too human centered, this project proceeds under the assumption that an anthropocentric viewpoint will drive its reading and analysis. This does not mean that the texts completely disregard this issue, but rather that they attempt to articulate what a human-centered view of the environment can provide that does not merely relegate the nonhuman world to an afterthought. Ecologically speaking, consideration for human life must take into account other species because neglecting those concerns comes at the detriment to humans themselves. As Buell points out in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*: “the soundest positions...will be those that come closest to speaking *both* to humanity’s most essential needs and to the state and fate of the earth and its nonhuman creatures independent of those needs, as well as to the balancing if not also the reconciliation of the two” (127). Buell’s statement suggests that the most effective environmental discourses will not isolate humanity

from the natural world, and while humans can never truly “think like a mountain,” they can and should consider other points of view, including nonhuman ones, when making decisions about the health and future of the planet.⁶ The texts in this project represent anthropocentric perspectives, but the way they position the American figure in relation to this issue reflects the balance that Buell suggests. Ultimately, the texts’ treatment of these viewpoints produces a more comprehensive understanding of how a human-centered perspective does not necessarily come at the detriment to all other species. Aldo Leopold points out that humans are capable of mourning for other species, and the texts acknowledge this while also suggesting that mourning more for the disadvantaged of our own species might result in a more just world.

The balanced way the texts represent the ecocentric and anthropocentric issue resembles their similarly balanced treatment of the issue of scientific expertise and local knowledge. Skepticism toward science refers to the tendency, particularly in local environmental justice movements, for activists to be wary of how scientific expertise can be used to control the way situations are perceived and thus what solutions will be proposed. Certain traditions of mainstream environmentalism tend to privilege technological and scientific expertise over other forms of knowledge and evidence. One claim within current scholarship is that scientific discourse, like all discourse, simply represents another way of viewing the world and can contain the same subjectivities that any ideology does. Science has both a philosophical and social side, and scientists arrive at knowledge through multiple methodologies. The self-correcting tendencies of scientific processes demonstrate science working well and reveal the best of what

⁶ Aldo Leopold, in *A Sand County Almanac*, extolls the benefits of “think[ing] like a mountain” in regard to considering the connections among species in an ecosystem. Leopold recognizes his error in killing a wolf because the decline of the dominant predator has profound effects on other species. To “think like a mountain” implies a perspective that considers the entire biotic community and does not automatically prioritize human desires and concerns.

science has to offer. But science cannot escape social and cultural expectations, and the social interactions of scientists—the means by which their knowledge is conducted and distributed—can affect outcomes. Peet, Robbins, and Watts acknowledge that science is fundamental to political ecology but also note that it is a problematic enterprise: “The exclusive role of science as an adjudicator of environmental conditions or ‘truths’ has historically led to the marginalization of different ways of knowing and explaining the world, putting undue influence and power in the hands of technical experts” (38). Nelta Edwards treats scientific language as a construction of reality (105) and challenges the notion that the social position of the scientist is irrelevant to the research results (113). Everyone is positioned, even scientists and scientific discourse, but she does not believe in complete relativism (114).

Science does not have an independent existence outside of social structures, but the existence of framing does not mean the end result is automatically false. Caminero-Santangelo affirms Edwards’ conclusions: he argues that recognizing expert knowledge is influenced by social factors does not mean it is “false,” but that all forms of knowledge must be understood as “never beyond the shaping influence of ideology” (229). Walker insists on the importance of recognizing that facts come from social processes too: “This means that giving attention to the ethics of how research is carried out, and who is involved in setting priorities, in making methodological choices and decisions and in interpreting and making sense of results, needs to be part of evidence generation” (Walker 217). Skepticism toward science in environmental justice movements may not come as a surprise. The institutional reality of who funds scientific research can contribute to the perspectives that are encouraged and the findings that are favored, and examples exist of scientific studies being manipulated and used to further certain ends.

Activists must be willing to face some pitfalls of questioning scientific expertise. Those in positions of power have greater access to the means for distributing their knowledge. Media accounts still place value in the perceived objectivity of institutionally-recognized experts. Those who have respect are able to make their knowledge count more than others. Walker discusses the “politics of evidence” that explain why some claims are given more authority and respect than others (63). He states that different actors produce different kinds of evidence: statistical, quantitative evidence that relies on access to information and data, and qualitative and experiential evidence that is accumulated through everyday observation and through methods that generate narratives (54-62). Because appeals based on experiential knowledge can be met with resistance and disbelief, potentially curbing the effectiveness of environmental justice movements, Walker argues for the need to rethink how evidence is evaluated. The texts in this project negotiate this issue to show skepticism toward scientific expertise, to celebrate local knowledge, and to demonstrate space must exist for multiple kinds of knowledge to be heard when working toward solutions.

The kind of knowledge one privileges can affect where one locates responsibility for an issue, which relates to questions of scale. Michael Watts and Richard Peet define what geographers designate as “politics of scale”: “[scale] encompass[es] a number of political arenas, from *the body* to the locally imagined *community* to *state and intra-state struggles* to new forms of *global governance*” (“Liberating Political Ecology” 4). According to Watts and Peet, scale refers to individual inequalities, inequalities within a society or nation, and inequalities between societies and nations. Competing values and priorities are imbedded in this issue when, for example, local needs may conflict with larger, mainstream environmental movements’ goals. Tom Lynch insists on the importance of movements retaining a local focus. He argues against

the push toward universal politics for environmental justice because focusing on local issues and work makes those endeavors more meaningful than trying to connect with greater concerns (249). Lynch's perspective coincides with an American environmental justice frame that traditionally concentrates on local and national issues. Scholars like David Harvey and Martinez-Alier agree that one of the greatest strengths of environmental justice movements is their local focus but they caution that the provincial appeal may simultaneously prove to be one of its greatest weaknesses. If a movement is concerned with local predicaments only then it risks protecting its own locale and subsequently displacing the burden to someone else's backyard. Additionally, an issue like climate change necessitates international cooperation beyond local and even national initiatives to curb stresses like automobile emissions and industrial pollution. The roles of globalization and interdependent economies cannot be ignored either. The connection between local economies and global flows of resources and products means that economic intervention must consider markets beyond the immediately affected situation. The roles played by transnational corporations, national governments, and mainstream environmental groups backed by Western patrons add complex layers to this issue.

When one compares the American frame exemplified by Lee to the frames present in the other texts some limitations of a solely local or national scale surface. The authors who write about non-American contexts suggest that environmental issues facing the world today cannot be isolated to and treated on local and national levels only, and a key aspect of the situations represented involves garnering the awareness of the international community. For example, Ghosh represents the responsibility for environmental injustices suffered by local inhabitants of the Sundarbans on multiple scales. He demonstrates how the national Indian government's actions through political maneuvering and military force led to the violent and deadly evacuation

of the refugees. Ghosh makes it clear that the government's motivation for expelling the refugees extends beyond national borders; the promise of eco-tourism dollars and international favor that can be earned through the establishment of a Bengal tiger reserve greatly influences the decisions made. In this way, Ghosh suggests that potential remedies for the injustices suffered must involve intervention on local, national, regional, and international scales. The importance of funding as well as moral outrage and political pressure makes global intervention critical to the successes of many movements. For example, Saro-Wiwa shows that the problems facing the Ogoni stem from injustices on many levels, which mean his appeals for support target activists at various scales.

The importance of intervention on multiple scales connects to Harvey's argument that in order for environmental justice movements to progress they must consider how to preserve their local, particular focus while simultaneously placing those concerns in a larger, global movement. Peet, Robbins, and Watts echo Harvey's sentiments, "a full accounting of environmental degradation must powerfully link ecological process to poverty and local political struggle...but also to the highest levels and concentrations of state and corporate power and wealth" (30). Where the authors locate blame affects the potential solutions they will propose. The examples in this project represent responsibility for environmental injustices on several levels. When international agencies collaborate with local struggles, the danger of green imperialism surfaces, which indicates why the texts that represent situations outside of the United States prioritize dialogue instead of instruction from the "top-down." The American figure transforms in these examples so she does not dictate the terms or methods of struggle but rather learns to respect the local customs and culture, work alongside the local residents, and offer whatever strengths and assets she can contribute.

Individual actions compared to systemic policy changes add another element to scalar considerations. This issue becomes increasingly important when considering the degree and speed of contemporary environmental impact. Lynch comments on a sense of proportion in relation to mainstream, middle-class environmentalism. A concern about littering or a commitment to recycling can seem misguided or superficial when juxtaposed against a lack of regard for conspicuous consumption that has a far greater impact on the environment (253-254). Lynch raises a valid point about the effect an individual act—recycling a water bottle—compared to systemic change—reducing the global market for bottled water—can have on what activists are interested in preserving. Lynch’s arguments foreground questions at the heart of whether individual actions will suffice or if societal transformation will be necessary for confronting the scale of environmental issues. The slogan “think globally; act locally” suggests that individual, local acts can have an influence when considered in relation to larger issues and systems. One can feel empowered by the idea that personal choices can have an effect in the face of large-scale issues, and the mantra contains an underlying assumption that individuals have the ability to grasp and anticipate the connections between what one does in relation to the environment and the expected consequences.

This issue connects to questions of scale; there can be differences between the changes needed and the designations of responsibility and blame depending on the scale where the issue is positioned. For example, Lee represents Hurricane Katrina on a national scale and assigns blame to individual actors, mostly government officials, while Sinha’s novel, *Animal’s People*, suggests that a variety of national and international systems contribute to injustices suffered by the people of Khaufpur-Bhopal. In addition to Sinha, Saro-Wiwa and Ghosh represent the virtue

of activist-minded individuals, but they also point out that individual acts, although done with virtuous intentions, might be insufficient for current problems.

The texts emphasize that if existing systems contribute to the problems, then solutions that fit within those models would not fix the root of the injustices. McNeill explains the challenges of enacting meaningful changes: “There may be other desirable initiatives, such as converting the masses to some new creed of ecological restraint or coaxing rulers into considering time horizons longer than the next election or coup. These are more difficult and less practical, precisely because they are more fundamental” (359-60). The writers in this project represent pivotal moments that move the American figure to personal transformation, and those individual changes are tied to shifts in bigger systems. In other words, transformation must entail a different understanding of the relationship between individuals and systems and one example of how this might occur is through revising the narratives individual figures use to understand their place in the world. The texts imply that within current systems, fundamental shifts may be necessary, and the texts’ representations of societal change imagine scenarios where cultural, political, and economic institutions would be profoundly altered on multiple scales.

One criticism of an American environmental justice frame has been its tendency to focus within the borders of the United States and not connect its interests to international movements. A practical consideration for many authors rests on the desire to appeal to readers outside of the affected community in order to raise awareness and support for their causes, which encourages many writers to infuse their narratives with meaning that resonates beyond the particular circumstance. But danger exists when claiming to represent an experience or narrative as having totalizing significance. DeLoughrey and Handley suggest ways to bridge the representation of particular elements with gestures toward global relevance: “O’Brien argues that foregrounding

the limitations of representation and translation, and engaging the local and often inassimilable aspects of culture and history, help to uphold a sense of alterity while still engaging a global imaginary” (28). Saro-Wiwa, Sinha, and Ghosh include language, characters, and scenarios that infuse the local situations they represent with broader meaning while retaining a sense of difference. This contrasts with a traditional American frame, like Lee represents, which treats local or national situations as insular movements without engaging global connections.

The frame used by Lee emphasizes racial oppression as the cause of the injustices suffered during Hurricane Katrina. A crucial question for environmental justice framing is how categories such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, caste, and age affect the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits. The phrases “environmental racism” and “environmentalism of the poor” derive from scholars in the field, and they signal the different vocabularies used by movements fighting injustices. With its roots in movements to combat environmental racism, it is easiest to see how an American environmental justice frame that emphasizes race corresponds to situations in the United States where racial difference has been used to justify domination and oppression. But does an American environmental justice frame work in other parts of the world where race may not be the predominant indicator of oppression?

Lynch warns of the danger of a frame that focuses on racial considerations at the expense of other concerns: ““a critical class struggle is taking place and the environmental movement is in danger of being on the wrong side”” (256-257). He insists that environmentalism must have class-consciousness and an awareness of how ethnic diversity affects perceptions of ecological integrity (257). Comfort explains how some movements redefine poverty and cultural oppression as environmental issues in order to bring together forces of resistance that previously have been “segregated into separate spheres of struggle” (242). Comfort’s description resonates with global

environmental justice perspectives, and both Comfort's and Lynch's assessments are reflected in the ways the writers who represent situations outside the United States position this issue in their writing. Ghosh, Sinha, and Saro-Wiwa make the case that nationally-specific approaches to social designations that contribute to oppression are inadequate. They depict the importance of connecting the cultural, historical, and political realities of particular locations to global circuits of racial, gender, and economic oppression that sustain local injustices. For example, Saro-Wiwa focuses on how ethnic and class inequalities on the national level contribute to the dire situation for the Ogoni people, but he argues that racism on a global scale plays a role in the injustices suffered by the people of the Niger Delta.

As the previous example illustrates, Saro-Wiwa uses a variety of strategies in his text to reach readers. For a project interested in literary representation, craft is crucial. How movements can adequately represent their particular situations in order to encourage readers-viewers to support their causes raises questions of form. Strong aspects of environmental justice discourse are emotional and moral appeals. Sze comments on this ability to move beyond data and facts, "Environmental justice can be read and understood not only through the narrow grid of public policy, but through the contours of fantasy, literature, and imagination as well" (173). The role of language and literature in these debates becomes clear when one thinks about how issues of public policy are determined by the ways one values certain places, people, and animals. Often priorities are influenced by how subjects and places are represented in the cultural productions—novels, films, essays—one digests. Additionally, the urgency of a situation affects what genre might be best for distributing the message to the public. While authors' and activists' literary abilities play a role in the genre they choose to employ, certain situations necessitate generic modes that can be written, published, and read in timely manners. The texts analyzed in this

project suggest that authors rely on nonfiction approaches for immediate, urgent situations, while fiction seems more appropriately suited to represent less-pressing issues or situations where slow violence is the culprit.

The chapters that follow explore how an American environmental justice frame looks when compared to globally-positioned perspectives. Chapter one, “A Requiem for Nature: An American Environmental Justice Frame and Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*,” establishes a recent example of an American environmental justice frame with which to compare the other writers’ representations of American figures and readers-viewers. Lee’s film represents Hurricane Katrina as an environmental injustice instead of a “natural” disaster, and his depiction challenges the viewer to rethink the causes and effects of climatic disturbances like hurricanes. The rhetorical strategies Lee uses align with a traditionally American environmental justice frame: the vocabulary of environmental racism is prominent in the film, and he confines his criticism to individuals and institutions within the borders of the United States.

The second chapter, “Lessons from the Niger Delta: Reader Transformation in Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *A Month and a Day*,” highlights some of the limitations of an American environmental justice frame. The analysis focuses on the activist strategies that Saro-Wiwa observed while on a trip to Colorado, which contribute to the appeals he makes to attract American readers. Saro-Wiwa recognizes the importance of American support to his goals for the Ogoni people, and he frames the situation to transform the reader into understanding a globally-attuned environmental justice perspective that uses the vocabulary of micro-minority ethnic rights instead of a solely nationally and racially-focused frame like the one represented by Lee.

Chapter three, “Decentering an American Activist: Global Environmental Justice in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*,” moves from a focus on appeals made to American readers-viewers to analysis of the representation of an American figure in a novel. The chapter transitions from a nonfiction account of the human-caused pollution in the Niger Delta, to Sinha’s fictional recreation of the Union Carbide chemical factory disaster in Bhopal, India. Sinha crafts the American figure Dr. Elli Barber as a liminal character who represents the possibility for dialogue between local and global attitudes and policies about environmental regulations, corporate actions, and individual responsibility. A key component in the evolution of her character is Elli’s willingness to confront how others view her and America’s role in the on-going tragedy that affects the local community. Once she decenters her position in the struggle and learns from the local movement as opposed to trying to dictate the terms of activism, space opens for potential solutions.

Elli’s transformation differs slightly, but significantly, from the American figure, Piya, in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. The final chapter, “Re-Imagining Places and People in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” addresses another Indian novel with an historical event at the heart of its plot. The Morichjhāpi massacre in the tide country near southern Bengal sets the stage for Ghosh’s juxtaposition of human-caused and “natural” disasters that disproportionately affect the poorest and most disadvantaged people in the area. While Sinha depicts the transformation of Elli as the decentering of her American self within an environmental justice frame, Ghosh represents the transformation of Piya from a mainstream environmental activist concerned with conservation of nonhuman species into someone who promotes environmental justice. Ultimately, Ghosh provides multiple perspectives on the complex relationship between

local and global systems that reveal assumptions in Western conceptions of social and environmental issues and bring awareness to an area that is foreign to many of his readers.

A Requiem for Nature: An American Environmental Justice Frame and Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*

One of the first images viewers see in Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* is high water lapping near the top of a street sign. The street name is Humanity, and flood waters dangerously threaten to overtake the green rectangular sign. Lee's image succinctly portrays the theme for the next four hours of the documentary: the threat of losing a sense of humanity as a result of Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans. The image of the Humanity Street sign becomes more nuanced when considered from an environmental justice perspective: the rising waters that perilously converge on the sign represents the impossibility of separating humans and nature and signals the link between social concerns and climatic forces.

Lee frames Hurricane Katrina from a traditional American environmental justice perspective, which highlights the national institutions and policies that influence who is most vulnerable to environmental forces. The film addresses the attempt to control the Mississippi River, the effects of these attempts on the wetlands of Southern Louisiana, and how this contributes to the increased severity of hurricanes once they reach land. It also illustrates the toxic conditions many of the city's most vulnerable residents faced after the storm came ashore. Lee positions the situation in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast from a perspective that combines a national frame with the language of environmental racism. He disrupts the typical disaster narrative where a country unites in the face of calamity to represent how Hurricane Katrina reveals that certain residents are unequally burdened by social and environmental practices that lead to the devastating ramifications of the storm. He appeals to national pride and American rights to make his argument, and he shows the viewer how the effects of the hurricane for particular populations of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast are not "natural."

The history of the levee system used to control the Mississippi River and the effects this has on the wetlands of Southern Louisiana helps substantiate why Lee frames Hurricane Katrina as an environmental justice issue. In *The Control of Nature* [1989], John McPhee outlines the attempts to control the Mississippi River for economic purposes. The demand for more levees to prevent flooding resulted in the government giving swamp land to the states, which in turn sold the land to help pay for the levees. However, the absentee owners who bought up the swamps, which were natural reservoirs that took in flood waters, drained the swamps to make it agricultural land, and thus demanded even bigger levees (McPhee 36). In essence, the levees aggravated the problem they were meant to solve because the natural reservoirs for flood waters were choked off (McPhee 42). McPhee's assessments connect continued wetland depletion with increased vulnerability to hurricane surges because a mile of marsh reduces coastal surge by about an inch, so if fifty miles of marsh disappear, then fifty inches of additional water will surge (63).

In his book, *Bayou Farewell*, published in 2003, Mike Tidwell elaborates on the destructive impact the vanishing wetlands will have on southern Louisiana: "It is, hands down, the fastest-disappearing landmass on earth, and New Orleans itself is at great risk of vanishing" (6). Nixon's concept of slow violence can be likened McPhee's and Tidwell's accounts of wetland erosion in Louisiana. Nixon defines slow violence as environmental devastation like toxic build-up, desertification, or greenhouse gas accumulation that has delayed effects, which are often deferred for generations (22). He links environmental erosion to an erosion of civil rights. The consequences of slow violence became evident on August 29, 2005 when Hurricane Katrina came ashore and the storm surge caused inadequate levees to breach, which flooded almost eighty percent of New Orleans. News coverage of the destruction from Katrina broadcast

worldwide, and the discussions that followed focused on the plight of the residents who were unable to evacuate before the storm. Images of devastated residents garnered immediate attention and inaugurated an international outpouring of aid to the region. But the plight of the wetlands was largely absent from the coverage.

Lee's documentary traces the history of the levee system to the early 1900s, and he demonstrates how the effects of the "natural" disaster were years in the making. Instead of treating Katrina as a singular event, Lee encourages viewers to think about the hurricane as a process, which aligns with what John Hannigan describes as the "strong version" of the relationship between disasters and politics: "the strong version asserts that natural disasters are *direct products* of their surrounding social, political, and economic environments" (12). By framing the disaster as a process, Lee represents a different environmental sensibility than a mainstream American viewer may be accustomed to; he challenges the notion that Hurricane Katrina was "natural" or an "act of God" and instead highlights the institutions, policies, and socioeconomic conditions that exacerbate the effects of the climatic disturbance on the human residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Lee emphasizes the actions and decisions that led to the devastating effects for certain residents in New Orleans immediately before, during, and after Katrina came ashore.

Lee foregrounds social and political concerns as irrevocably linked to ecological outcomes, and in particular, national policy decisions and the racial make-up of residents are positioned as contributing to Hurricane Katrina's effects. The national focus of Lee's film is apparent during an early scene in the documentary. Lee's camera lingers on the image of a tattered American flag as it whips around its pole and wind and rain batter down on New Orleans. Lee insists that this story is not only about New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, but as the

cover of the DVD proclaims, this represents an American Tragedy. Lee emphasizes the importance of New Orleans to the rest of the country through the inclusion of historic images of the city combined with Katrina footage while the song that opens the film, “Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?” plays in the background. This juxtaposition underlines the prospect that Lee poses throughout the documentary: Americans have watched this happen to New Orleans and as a result risk losing the city’s unique culture and influence.

Documentary Film Genre

Lee uses techniques available to the documentary film maker to emphasize the ecological, racial, and national aspects that he considers crucial to understanding what went wrong in New Orleans. HBO aired *When the Levees Broke* in August 2006, about two weeks before the August 29th one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. The documentary is organized in four acts: the first act addresses the situation that led up to Hurricane Katrina and the breaching of the levees.⁷ The ensuing acts focus on the recovery efforts and issues that affect the response to the flooding of the city. Lee utilizes visual images, music, and interviews with a wide range of experts, officials, celebrities, activists, and residents of New Orleans to construct the memorable and heart-wrenching narrative. The images Lee includes do not always coincide with the discourse the figures propagate. This rhetorical strategy must be kept in mind with a visual medium like the documentary; the viewer quickly understands who Lee wants the viewer to sympathize with and who he thinks should shoulder the blame for this tragedy. For example, Lee provides footage of President George W. Bush speaking about the disaster, and Bush’s

⁷ For additional reading on human attempts to control the Mississippi River, the destructive impact of the vanishing wetlands, and the risk of flooding associated with both of those topics, please see John McPhee’s *The Control of Nature* and Mike Tidwell’s *Bayou Farewell* and *Ravaging Tide*.

statements are followed by aerial images of the devastation below. Lee's framing indicates that Bush's rhetoric and the reality on the ground do not coincide.

The ability to release a documentary within a year of the disaster allows Lee to capitalize on the timeliness and urgency of the situation. A film allows an activist like Lee to be on the ground speaking to those affected by the storm. He wants viewers to more thoroughly understand the experiences of residents who suffered during Hurricane Katrina. Potentially, the audience for a documentary may be much larger than a novel, particularly a film commissioned and distributed by HBO. The biggest advantages to this genre are the actual voices and images that can be incorporated into the narrative. Lee interviews people who might not otherwise get to tell their stories. Viewers can see these people on screen, which provides the (illusion) of immediacy that fills the documentary with emotion. The visual element takes the destruction beyond the level of abstraction and allows Lee to show residents in the places they are now—FEMA trailers, devastated neighborhoods, and cities in other states. Images of New Orleans before the storm can be used to emphasize what was lost, and a feeling of nostalgia runs through the film. Lee's use of music, specifically jazz music, reflects the cultural legacy of New Orleans and causes viewers to confront what will be missed if this city does not rebuild. The news footage and other archival images that Lee includes allow him to reproduce images that viewers may have seen already. But he can provide additional, or counter, context and narrative to these images in order to further his argument about the situation. In short, the documentary film appeals to senses beyond description.

Lee uses the genre with expert skill and employs a variety of strategies that complicate an easy-classification of his documentary process. *When the Levees Broke* most readily falls into the tradition of "compilation" film (Saunders 37). Lee takes advantage of spectacular footage and the

documentary genre lends itself to this type of representation. David MacDougall speaks to the power images can add to narrative and history: “‘Appearance is knowledge, of a kind. Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable. Visual knowledge...provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people’” (qtd. in Saunders 11). Environmental abstractions like melting glaciers, thermal expansion, rising sea levels, and computer models can be difficult to infuse with dramatic urgency. Lee’s use of the documentary or nonfiction film genre allows him to bring these to life for viewers so they can see and hear what continued neglect of wetlands, soil erosion, climate change, and infrastructure projects causes. Lee does not actively participate in front of the camera. Viewers never see Lee and rarely hear him pose a question, but they feel his presence nonetheless. This strategy allows Lee to make his argument through the voices of others instead of appearing too politically polemic himself.

Framing Environmental Justice

The “framing” motif is crucial to how the viewer understands Lee’s representation of Hurricane Katrina. Literally and figuratively, Lee frames the narratives in the documentary. At the end of the film, the participants hold picture frames around their faces and state their names for the credits. This leaves the viewer with the impression that although the interviewees have shared their experiences and encouraged empathy from the viewer, the narratives have not been unmediated. Ultimately Lee controls what makes it on screen. In light of the way Lee frames the perspective of the documentary, it is worth revisiting Walker’s assertion that environmental justice originated in the United States and has been exported around the globe. The shortcomings of Walker’s re-centering of environmental justice as an American phenomenon become more apparent when examining the strengths and weaknesses of Lee’s environmental justice perspective.

Some deficiencies surface in Lee's nationally-focused environmental justice frame. His film challenges mainstream American ideas about environmental disasters, but when viewed from global environmental justice perspectives it does not fully encapsulate the complex intersection of social and ecological considerations surrounding the storm. Lee emphasizes race as a contributing factor to the injustices suffered by residents but neglects to thoroughly address how class issues play a role in the policy decisions that exacerbated the effects of the storm. The national focus of the film confines the blame and responsibility within the borders of the United States and the distribution of damages remains within local and national contexts. Criticism of Lee's film should not overshadow the remarkable task he undertakes and the convincing means by which he transforms the viewer into understanding a culturally-connected perspective on environmental issues. Instead, it is meant to point out some of the limitations of Lee's particular frame, especially when his documentary is put into conversation with texts that represent situations outside American borders that engage less nationally-exclusive and more globally-inclusive environmental justice perspectives.

Multiple Environmental Perspectives

Through a compilation of personal narratives, Lee presents several environmental discourses in the film to demonstrate the multiple vocabularies that people use to discuss situations like Hurricane Katrina. Harvey examines the history and ideology behind four environmental discourses—the standard view, wise-use, ecological modernization, and environmental justice—with particular interest in how environmental justice is positioned in response to the other three. Lee features three of these discourses in the film, and he encourages the viewer to recognize the inadequacies of other perspectives for explaining Katrina and therefore prepares the audience to more readily accept his environmental justice frame. The

documentary presents a variety of views on the situation in New Orleans that are situated based on residents' values, social status, and economic and political power. Lee frames the situation to place blame on certain individuals and institutions while simultaneously praising other individuals and institutions. The standard view is the typical way many viewers understand natural disasters and is one of Lee's main targets.

According to Harvey, proponents of the standard view treat each environmental incident or event as an individual occurrence, which requires intervention only after the fact. From this perspective, environmental concerns should not stand in the way of progress—economic efficiency, continuous growth, and capital accumulation—and the benefits of growth should not be unnecessarily relinquished for overly solicitous respect for the environment. The standard view assumes that a “remedial science” exists that can step in and cope with any difficulties that do arise in relation to irreversible problems. Science can and always will be one step ahead of anything humans can do to the environment and therefore humans do not have to worry about the consequences (Harvey 374). Lee's representation of the standard view suggests the serious limitations it has for dealing with situations like Katrina. Lee does not include anyone who highlights virtuous aspects of the approach; rather, he focuses on proponents whose primary concerns are economic efficiency, growth, and the belief that there will be time to address the environmental problems in the future, which Lee exposes as morally misguided in light of the present suffering in New Orleans and surrounding areas.

The viewer quickly recognizes that Lee associates the standard view in the film with the United States government. Lee shows footage of President Bush addressing the frustration people have voiced about the slow federal response: “there will be plenty of opportunities to help later on.” President Bush's statement relates to the “standard view” that Hurricane Katrina and

the flooding of New Orleans represents a separate, individual act of destruction where the best method of reaction is an after-the-fact clean-up and distribution of aid. According to Lee, the slow response by the federal government indicates the president's unwillingness to mobilize against environmental threats in the same way that he fights "terror." Lee points fingers at certain individuals to suggest that there could have been a different outcome if only these particular people had reacted differently. Some of the more infamous scenes in Lee's film include images of President Bush flying over New Orleans instead of establishing himself on the ground as the nation's leader, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice shopping and playing tennis while people suffer in the Convention Center and the Superdome, and Kanye West's statement that President Bush does not like black people. Lee's representation of the national government and its most visible leaders reflects his opinion that institutional racism contributed to the neglect of black citizens during a great time of need.

In addition to Lee's juxtaposition of images and news clips to project blame on proponents of the standard view, Lee includes interviews with residents who expose limitations of the perspective. Henry Rodriguez and Robert Rocque articulate flaws in the standard view approach. By allowing residents to voice criticisms he wishes to convey, Lee avoids, to a certain degree, being perceived as too dogmatic in the film. Rodriguez, St. Bernard Parish President, points out that the building of the levees started 40 years ago, but they still are not finished. He calls the current situation "payback." Robert Rocque, a resident of the Ninth Ward, echoes Rodriguez's sentiments. Rocque claims that the government believed the levees cost too much money, but he points out that now that the levees have failed, the government will have to spend much more money to fix the problem. He acknowledges that many people prefer the standard view approach but that prevention of the levee breach would have been better than addressing

the problem *after* the fact. Rodriguez and Rocque imply that the nation's attitude about economic costs trumps infrastructure needs and citizen safety. Through their testimony, the audience realizes the dangers and limitations of considering Katrina from the standard view perspective.

Lee also includes an ecological modernization point of view in the film, which emphasizes government-led regulations or collective interventions to prevent problems before they arise. The key word when speaking of ecological modernization is "sustainability": it becomes crucial to demonstrate that ecological modernization can be profitable. This view contrasts with the standard view in that ecological modernization considers preventative measures preferable to intervention after the occurrence of environmental damage because prevention is cheaper than clean-up. Advocates of an ecological modernization perspective propose a far more systemic set of politics, institutional arrangements, and regulatory practices because economic activity produces environmental harm, and therefore society should adopt an active stance in regard to environmental regulation and controls (Harvey 377). Ecological modernization differs from an environmental justice perspective in its privileging of scientific discourse and its concern for future generations. The discourse is not as coherent as Harvey summarizes it and dangers of political cooptation exist (378). Because of its emphasis on profitability, it has the potential to be appropriated for economic power by corporations in their desire to manage the world's resources (Harvey 382).

In the documentary, John Barry, author of *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*, describes an ecological modernization point of view in relation to the events of Hurricane Katrina. Barry explains the power of the Mississippi River and the sediment distribution problems that contributed to the stress on the levees. He claims that the main issue behind the Mississippi River threat is the erosion of wetlands in southern

Louisiana. He further contends that the one issue environmental groups and oil companies can now agree on is the necessity of stopping the erosion and rebuilding the wetlands. The oil companies' positions are consistent with an ecological modernization view that preventing further destruction to the wetlands would be preferable to addressing the problem of flooding after it happens again. The prioritization of the economic implications tied to the status of the wetlands corresponds to ecological modernization's promotion of economic development and profitability.

Lee uses this perspective to widen the circle of blame to include the oil companies in cohort with the national government and the Army Corps of Engineers. Lee builds the case that multiple institutions in conjunction with one another contributed to the devastation that occurred after Hurricane Katrina. Tidwell explains the oil companies' role in the devastation of wetlands: "Early on, the big companies—Texaco, Amoco, and others—launched the practice of extensive canal dredging that continued for nearly half a century...canals, once dredged through the marsh, trigger disastrous erosion" (*Bayou Farewell* 35). Lee provides viewers with multiple perspectives on how current systems—political and economic—contribute to the social and environmental problems that became readily apparent because of the hurricane. Economic consequences contribute to the reluctance to alleviate the pressure on the wetlands and ecosystem. As Harvey points out in his assessment of environmental discourses and as Lee represents in his film, institutions, systems, and processes create environmental injustices.

An American Tragedy

By including and then challenging other perspectives on Hurricane Katrina's causes and effects, Lee reinforces his argument that environmental justice discourse most effectively

represents the situation in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. He portrays the storm as a case of environmental racism—in New Orleans, “elevation is destiny” and the poorer, black neighborhoods are significantly lower in elevation than other areas. His prioritization of the racial make-up of the city’s residents aligns the film with an American environmental justice frame. According to Harvey, environmental justice discourse is radically at odds with the standard view and an ecological modernization perspective because inequalities are the priority for environmental justice (385), which differs from emphases on progress and sustainability. Harvey considers environmental justice the most equipped to avoid cooptation by corporate interests, and he sees its localized focus as one of its greatest strengths. The local focus allows for sensitivity to specific concerns and flexibility in intervention strategies. In the film, Lee’s local focus corresponds to a national scale. According to Lee’s argument, this is an American tragedy.

The particular environmental justice frame that emerges from Lee’s film centers on two significant relationships: the connection between race and national policies and the connection between race and scientific expertise. Through appeals to national pride and American rights Lee links Hurricane Katrina and national identity to challenge who counts as an American citizen in practice when aid and support are needed. The film questions the social, political, and environmental policies that disproportionately burdened the city’s black and poor residents. Garland Robinette, host of WWL Radio and resident of Uptown, highlights how he views the correlation between race and national policies. He states that he understands why many people may discount the importance of New Orleans and its residents: they have very little political power and money, and it is mostly a black city. Robinette questions the policy that allows the royalties from oil rigs built three miles off the coast of Louisiana to go to the federal government

instead of the state coffers. He points out that Louisiana controls thirty percent of the country's oil and natural gas. However, unlike other states in the country, Louisiana does not reap the benefits of its energy production. In the film, Douglas Brinkley compares Louisiana to a colony that the rest of the United States extracts resources from and then the money goes out of state.⁸ The impact of Louisiana on the rest of the country is apparent, and Robinette argues that if other states are allowed to benefit from oil companies that extract local resources, then Louisiana should benefit too. He says,

If they'd give us our percentage of oil and gas like Texas gets, like New Mexico gets, Wyoming gets, Colorado gets, Alaska gets, if they'd give us that we can build our own wetlands, rebuild 'em, we can build our category five levees, we can, instead of having to cut out the neighborhoods that are our culture because we no longer can afford 'em, we could bring those neighborhoods back too [...] Give us our oil and gas money. We'll help ourselves.

Robinette clearly believes that given the opportunity, Louisianan residents would take better care of their state than the federal government does. He emphasizes the need for justice in terms of distribution of resources and adequate compensation. Robinette gives voice to the implication that Louisiana has been politically and ecologically exploited because of its poor and black demographic. Lee's representation of city and state government officials is kinder than the image he propagates about national leaders, but overall Lee depicts failures that occurred at all political

⁸ Mike Tidwell emphasizes the economic importance of Louisiana to the rest of the United States: New Orleans handles more than a fifth of American imports and exports daily, the region produces more oil and natural gas than America imports each year from Saudi Arabia, a third of America's domestic seafood comes from coastal Louisiana, and New Orleans generates \$5 billion in tourism revenue based on its unique cultural legacy (Tidwell *Ravaging Tide* 18-19).

levels, which compounded the indignity and the infringement on citizen rights for many residents of New Orleans.

In addition to being ignored or neglected by their elected officials, Lee makes the case that residents and their actions were misrepresented based on racial stereotypes in national media accounts that documented the storm and its aftermath. Multiple residents talk in the film about the effect of being referred to as refugees and of being denied certain rights after the storm: “I’m a U.S. citizen. Did the storm blow away our citizenship too? I thought that was people who don’t have countries.” Two speakers describe their attempt to walk across the Gretna Bridge from Orleans Parish to Jefferson Parish, but they are met by lines of guns and not allowed to walk out of town.⁹ Karen Carter, a state representative, laments the treatment of these residents: “I thought I lived in America until shortly after Katrina. Being not able to walk freely on U.S. soil; it was unjust and inhumane.” The testimony astonishes the viewer because of the blatant violation of citizens’ rights who were trying to help themselves get out of New Orleans when the government had not yet responded with effective means of evacuation. Lee uses these statements to remind viewers that American ideals are not honored for all people. From the perspective of those on the “outside” of the promises America makes to its citizens, the image of the United States during a time of crisis is not as just and compassionate as the ideal the country projects to the world. Through these narratives, Lee exposes the viewer to a cast of Americans who are not afforded the same rights and respect as others. The film questions why and how this could have happened, and Lee’s answer is racial and class prejudice.

⁹ It should be noted here that in the film two Caucasian speakers recount the instance at the Gretna Bridge. Lee’s film shows strong elements of racism contribute to the suffering of residents, but he does not completely reduce the situation in New Orleans to that, which reveals a complexity to his film that is admirable.

Lee represents race as playing a major role in the political rights violations experienced by residents. He also implies that a racial component contributes to the (mis)use of scientific knowledge in the lead-up to Katrina, and he infuses the film with skepticism toward the institutions that generate official studies. Skepticism toward scientific knowledge based on who commissions it and where it is distributed remains one hallmark of environmental justice movements. Suspicions remain about how different interests and values can affect the way official studies are conducted and used. Lee frames the documentary to indicate that different motives and values influence the outcome and implementation of findings, and skepticism toward expert accounts can best be understood when one examines the situated position from which subjects originate. Lee represents the situated position of New Orleans residents as being primarily contingent on race. The most controversial aspect of Lee's documentary is his inclusion of the belief that the levees were bombed to flood the poorer, black areas in order to preserve wealthier sections of New Orleans. Harry Cook, Joycelyn Moses, Sylvester Francis and Audrey Mason each testify to hearing an explosion before the levees breached. Francis identifies what he thinks caused the explosions: "I think the levee cracked and they helped it the rest of the way. They had a bomb. They bombed that sucker." Lee includes these opinions in order to indicate the truth as the speakers perceived it. The narratives Lee includes about the bombed-levee theory can be considered local knowledge. Local knowledge comprises an alternate logic or rationality that embraces the local social, political, and historical context that affects people's beliefs and ideas about information. The conclusion by some residents that the levees were bombed comes from a particular social and historical understanding of hurricanes in New Orleans and an experience of being mistreated or exploited across multiple aspects of their lives.

In the documentary, Marc Morial, former mayor of New Orleans, points out that similar rumors about bombed levees abounded among residents after Hurricane Betsy in 1965, and it became almost an article of faith that there was an intentional breach of the levees. Barry's comparison of Katrina to the 1927 flooding of New Orleans provides further context for residents' beliefs in bombing conspiracies. In that instance, the levees were dynamited in order to flood out neighboring parishes. Barry is quick to emphasize that "this wasn't about race; this was about money." Whether or not the levees were bombed in 1965 becomes immaterial; the suspicion that it was *possible* they were bombed like during the 1927 flooding adds enough credence to the theory for some residents to believe that similar actions were taken after Katrina.

Lee follows the residents' testimony with other accounts of the same events. Calvin Mackie and Brinkley, both professors at Tulane at the time, explain that they believe people heard explosions but they offer other explanations as to what caused the sounds, such as a snap when the levees gave or the collision of a barge into the levee wall. Brinkley adds that the people who believe the levees were dynamited "have a long experience of being ripped off...it's not a far jump to believe the urban myth that it got dynamited." In other words, certain residents have reason to suspect a situation like the bombing of levees could be plausible. Brinkley's analysis reveals the reasoning and motivation behind some residents' interpretation of the levee breach.

In *Village Voice*, Larry Blumenfeld argues that Lee portrays this element of the story without sensationalism, but Nicholas Kulish, from *The New York Times*, has a different perspective: "Without quite endorsing them, Mr. Lee presents the utterly unfounded charges that the failed levees were blown up to flood poor black neighborhoods" (16). While Kulish's criticism reflects the attitudes of many viewers of the film, it ignores the context and history behind residents' beliefs and it misrepresents the extent Lee goes to in order to present multiple

perspectives on the bombed-levee theory. His review implies that Lee gives more credence to this position than he should, while the documentary as a whole suggests otherwise. For residents who know and understand the legacy of racial and class issues in the city, skepticism seems partially justified. Scientific expertise and other official discourses have long been used to promote certain interests. Lee's acknowledgment of residents' distrust does not endorse the bomb theory, but it helps to explain why activists fighting for social and environmental justice often turn a skeptical eye toward the way reports, studies, and actions have been used and manipulated for particular, often economic, ends. The multiple perspectives offered by Lee challenge the objectivity of official accounts in relation to the history of the levees. As Brinkley points out, certain groups of people have reason to believe that official studies can be used for political aims and for the interests of those who commission the experts. The overwhelming tone of this section of the documentary refutes the idea that the levees were intentionally bombed during Katrina, but Lee does help frame the motivation for some residents' suspicions that they were exploded.

To further establish patterns of injustice and justification for skepticism toward scientific expertise, Lee includes studies in the documentary that were conducted prior to Katrina but ignored. He represents a lack of immediate concern by those in power when a computer model exposes the problems a mandatory evacuation would cause. Mackie reveals that two years before Katrina, FEMA had funded a simulation called Hurricane PAM to determine what would happen if New Orleans were hit by a hurricane. Dr. Ivor Van Heerden, Director of Hurricane Public Research at the LSU Hurricane Center, explains what PAM discovered:

Hurricane PAM came up with some very, very significant findings and unfortunately these seem to be ignored by many, many agencies as we move

forward. One of the most significant was that we had identified through our own research that there were 127,000 people in New Orleans who didn't have access to motor vehicles. In addition, there were a large number of homeless and the disabled, so you were talking about a significant percentage of the population that couldn't evacuate. (*When the Levees Broke*)

Despite studies like PAM that demonstrate a significant portion of the population would be unable to evacuate, a mandatory evacuation was ordered.¹⁰ Many residents' inability to protect themselves from the potential damaging effects of a hurricane based on their socioeconomic status connects the neglect of this study's findings to environmental justice issues. Lee presents the scenario for the evacuation through footage of national weather coverage and discussions with Mayor Ray Nagin, Governor Kathleen Blanco, and head of the Hurricane Center, Max Mayfield. He also interviews Ninth Ward residents Tanya Harris, her mother Chirrie Harris, and her grandmother Josephine Butler. Residents of the Ninth Ward are predominantly African American, and Lee highlights how the mandatory evacuation and the ineffective recovery efforts place a disproportionate burden on this segment of the city's population.¹¹ Tanya Harris explains that her sister's van had broken down, and her sister did not want to leave because "evacuating can get kind of costly. And a lot of times we always just leave and nothing happens." Harris's narrative illustrates the economic considerations of evacuating, and the difficult decision many people faced. Lee highlights other aspects that would have prevented residents from leaving through images of people with walkers, carrying garbage bags or dragging suitcases with their belongings. Wendell Pierce, actor and resident of Pontchartrain Park, describes the scene: "There

¹⁰ The population of New Orleans in 2005 before Hurricane Katrina was less than 500,000, so by conservative estimates at least 25% of the population could not leave the city without assistance.

¹¹ By some estimates, before Hurricane Katrina approximately ninety-eight percent of the residents of the Ninth Ward were African American.

were lines of people going to the Superdome. They were holding them back saying this is a place of last resort so don't go yet." Lee shows that for many residents the place of last resort was their only viable option, which reinforces his argument that injustices existed well before Katrina came ashore.

The reality that the order will disproportionately affect the poor, elderly, and disabled explains why some people become disillusioned with scientific findings that are either used, or ignored, for the exploitation or domination of others. Studies anticipated that a significant number of people would not be able to evacuate New Orleans on their own yet contingency plans were not in place for the occasion of a storm like Katrina. Lee listens to those most affected by the storm and provides them an opportunity to voice their concerns, and the narratives in the film argue for the need for bureaucratic change. Through his use of certain images and narratives, Lee frames the mandatory evacuation section of the documentary to emphasize how race and class contributed to people's inability to get out of the city. The footage of people at the Super Dome and the Convention Center—set up as areas of last resort—shows African Americans made up the overwhelming majority of residents who were unable to leave town.¹²

The struggle against environmental racism is a fundamental aspect of an American environmental justice frame, and Lee's film produces substantial evidence to support his argument that many residents of New Orleans were neglected or ignored because of policies and practices that existed long before the storm, which disproportionately burdened African American residents. These burdens were magnified once the immediate crisis of the storm was fully realized. In addition to vocabularies of environmental racism, American movements for

¹² In *Come Hell or High Water*, Michael Eric Dyson points out that 63% of blacks blamed poverty for the slow rescue efforts during Katrina, while 21% of whites held that view. Lee's film aims to show viewers why black perspectives on the storm may differ from white responses.

environmental justice focus on exposure to toxins. Lee represents the deteriorating and toxic situation in New Orleans through images of human bodies to highlight the corporeal inequities that certain portions of the population suffered because they were unable to evacuate.

Lee includes footage of Soledad O'Brien from a CNN "State of Emergency" program where she tours the Convention Center. The broadcast reports the injustices suffered by the disproportionately black and poor residents of New Orleans and calls attention to the association between "trashy people as the logical recipients of trash" (Harvey 368). In the segment, O'Brien describes the atmosphere in and around the Convention Center: "The first thing you notice: the smell. It smells, like eww, it smells like dead bodies, it smells like urine, it smells like people who've waded through sewage to make their way from their houses." The surging water from the breached levees caused immediate damage and threatens to inflict further health problems with unsanitary conditions and the risk of disease. Harvey describes pollution as one analogy for the social order—if pollution is "matter out of place" then it cannot be separated from claims about the dangers and impurities of "people out of place" (368). Certain attitudes toward pollution suggest that Other people (racial, economic, national, ethnic, gender) should accept trash and toxins in their environments because they are accustomed to living in sub-par conditions, and they do not require, or are not worthy of, the same safe and healthy environments. Lee questions the way certain segments of the New Orleans population were associated with trash after the hurricane in emotionally-charged ways. He frames the situation at the Convention Center in a way that coincides with the idea that "these" people should be accustomed to conditions like this in order to expose and undermine this line of thinking. Through footage and interviews with residents who spent days in the Convention Center and/or Super Dome, Lee represents the racial

and class situatedness of residents who endured horrible conditions that contributed to their feeling unwelcome in their own city.

Lee follows O'Brien's piece with images of dead bodies throughout the city. There is no commentary; only somber music and footage of abandoned corpses. Near the end of the montage, Michael Knight accentuates the tragic and personal emotion of the situation in one of the most poignant moments of the documentary: "It's a mess man. Seen a lot of dead people floating. My buddy was over the gate around the corner. He swolled up this big, man. His name was Eddie." The viewer can no longer regard the bodies as nameless victims. Lee's strategy in this scene reflects one of the most effective tools available to environmental justice movements: "moral force and capacity for moral outrage" (Harvey 387). The inclusion of a named dead body adds a powerful emotional force to the film. Harvey elaborates on the "symbolic politics and powerful media icons" that environmental justice movements rely on:

Doing battle with the lack of self-respect that comes from 'being associated with trash' lends a very emotive symbolic angle to the [environmental justice] discourse and highlights the racial and discriminatory aspects to the problem. This ultimately pushes discussion far beyond the scientific evidence on, for example, health effects, cost-benefit schedules or 'parts per billion' to the thorny, volatile, and morally charged terrain of symbolic violence, 'cultural imperialism' and personalized revolt against the association of 'pollution' in its symbolic sense of defilement and degradation with dangerous social disorder and supposed racial impurities of certain groups in the population. (Harvey 387)

Lee emphasizes the racial aspects of the injustices and inequalities in the aid and recovery efforts. He shows the viewer how political and economic policies disproportionately affect certain groups in the United States. Lee challenges the idea that there was anything “natural” about how Katrina afflicted some residents of New Orleans more than others, and when viewed from an American environmental justice perspective, Lee’s documentary redefines for the audience how to understand phenomenon like hurricanes in relation to the intersection between environmental *and* social considerations.

Limitations of Lee’s Frame

Lee frames *When the Levees Broke* within a national context through the vocabularies of environmental racism and toxic conditions. He positions the viewer to adopt an American environmental justice perspective on Katrina, but he neglects to connect the situation in New Orleans to narratives where similar attitudes about the poor and oppressed are pervasive worldwide. When one compares Lee’s environmental justice argument with representations of similar injustices outside of United States borders, she sees the limitations of Lee’s perspective, and thus the limitations of an American environmental justice frame when it leaves a specifically national context and tries to engage issues on an international scale.

In his analysis of environmental discourses, Harvey argues that for environmental justice to progress as a viable means for effectively negotiating the economic and moral considerations of environmental impact, it must move from a politics of place toward more abstract politics and principles (371, 390). While Harvey’s prioritization of the global over the local has been criticized, his recommendation signals a limitation of the American frame and of Lee’s representation of the situation in New Orleans. Lee does not explicitly acknowledge the spatial

layering of environmental issues; rather he relies on racial and national appeals while neglecting the international scope of environmental concerns. For example, the national focus limits his ability to call attention to how events like hurricanes are not isolated but rather the increased frequency and intensity of their occurrences can be related to climate change. Lee shames the United States for what has happened in New Orleans, but an appeal to larger networks of international organizations, environmental or class-oriented, does not exist.

Some reviewers have criticized Lee for emphasizing racial issues at the expense of class concerns. Kulish states “But Mr. Lee undermines the latter goal [encouraging aid and assistance to those struggling to rebuild] whenever his film reduces Katrina to a black problem.” Kulish implies that Lee’s approach may be off-putting to some viewers and part of this reception could be due to Lee’s reputation as a director. Many of Lee’s previous projects examine racial issues, and some viewers consider Lee less politically neutral than other filmmakers. As a director, Lee comes to the project from a situated position in terms of his gender, race, socioeconomic status, and political views. While he remains mostly off-screen during the documentary, there is no question that he controls what perspectives dominate the film. Amy Taubin, writing in *Film Comment*, praises Lee’s film for making the narratives of the victims personal and unforgettable, but she also criticizes the documentary for not placing the circumstances in New Orleans within a larger temporal and spatial context:

I also wanted, as Paul Arthur has remarked, for Lee to situate the tragedy of New Orleans within the larger war on the poor—to connect the indifference the government showed to those who were trapped by the flood because they were too poor to leave town to an institutionalized neglect of the economically

underprivileged that has steadily intensified since the beginning of the Eighties.
(48)

Taubin says that her criticisms are “minor” (48), but she indicates a desire for the situation in New Orleans to be placed within a broader conversation about national attitudes in the United States toward poverty in the last 30 years. Lee represents institutionalized racism as the cause of suffering felt by many residents immediately before, during, and after Katrina but offers less of an indictment of the demonizing of the poor on the national level and includes no engagement with systems and policies that contribute to global poverty.

Taubin’s criticism is not minor but rather integral to thinking about movements for environmental justice on a global scale. It points toward the idea that climatic disturbances cannot be considered isolated events in a city or region that experiences ongoing crises like racial tension, chronic poverty, and ecological degradation. Her criticism begs the question of why Lee did not appeal to larger narratives of how this situation fits within a “war against the poor” on national or international scales, especially considering how a strong correlation exists between residents’ incomes and the elevations at which they live in New Orleans. McPhee explains this relationship:

Something like half of New Orleans is now below sea level—as much as fifteen feet. New Orleans, surrounded by levees, is emplaced between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi like a broad shallow bowl. Nowhere is New Orleans higher than the river’s natural bank. Underprivileged people live in the lower elevations, and always have. The rich—by the river—occupy the highest ground. In New Orleans, income and elevation can be correlated on a literally sliding scale. (59)

Lee's strategy allows him to maintain focus on the local, contemporary demands of the situation, and one commonality among all the environmental discourses represented in the documentary is the local focus; this is a New Orleans issue, a Louisiana issue, or a United States issue. The politics-of-place approach deployed by Lee coincides with a local focus championed by many environmental justice movements, but it also represents a weakness that may hinder its ability to gain a foothold in global discussions of environmental practices and solutions. Lee misses an opportunity to engage with considerations beyond race and national policies. His attention to the African American community in New Orleans is crucial, but he leaves largely unexplored other minority populations—Latino/a, Native American, and Vietnamese—that suffered similar injustices before, during, and after Katrina. The black/white divide has an infamous history in the United States, particularly in the South, and although his emphasis on this complicated relationship makes for compelling and intense viewing, it risks reducing a complex set of circumstances and concerns into one predominant tension at the expense of a broader and more nuanced discussion of the multiple factors on national and international scales that contribute to social and environmental injustices worldwide.

Lee's activism and commitment to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region cannot be questioned. He returned to the area five years after Katrina to make a follow-up documentary: *If God is Willing and the Creek Don't Rise*.¹³ But Lee misses an opportunity in *When the Levees*

¹³ *If God is Willing and the Creek Don't Rise* more explicitly acknowledges that the social problems of the United States are connected to environmental concerns. The film opens with the New Orleans Saints Super Bowl victory and revisits many familiar faces from *When the Levees Broke* to measure the status of recovery efforts after Katrina. While visual progress has been made, many residents refute the idea that the football victory signals the return of the city. There are still too many residents who have not come home and too many areas that have not been able to rebuild. The most disheartening aspect of the documentary is the final two hours, which are devoted to the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf. Lee admits that once the disaster occurred he knew he had to include it in his updated project. A reading of *If God is Willing and the Creek Don't Rise* is currently beyond the scope of this chapter, but as evidenced by the oil spill, the recovery of southern Louisiana is far from complete, and the consequences of persistent environmental degradation may result in irreversible damage and continued "spectacular" events and devastation in the United States and around the world.

Broke to connect the situation in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast with other movements that are joined in similar struggles. A strength of environmental justice movements rests in their ability to focus on what is morally correct compared to what is legally, scientifically, or pragmatically possible. The discourse's foundation in sacred and moral absolutes creates a homology among struggles (Harvey 389). The moral force in appeals for justice allows different groups to use similar strategies and vocabularies but in ways that are culturally specific to their situations. The increasing significance of interdependent economies and the borderless reality of weather events and climatic changes suggest that although retaining some cultural specificity in environmental justice movements remains crucial, dialogue among activists, governments, and aid organizations will become important for remedying current and preventing future injustices on the global scale at which they occur.

The exportability of an American environmental justice frame is challenged when viewed from perspectives outside of the United States. As the remaining chapters in this project will argue, an approach like Lee's that focuses on race within a national context cannot adequately account for the myriad social, political, and economic considerations that affect the distribution of environmental injustices on the global scale. His inattention to linking the situation in New Orleans to struggles worldwide reveals the limitations of a too provincially-focused frame.¹⁴

Chapter two examines Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* and makes the case for a broader definition of environmental justice than the current American frame encompasses. The analysis highlights significant appeals Saro-Wiwa uses to connect with an American audience by

¹⁴ It should be noted that Lee devotes part of the documentary to interviews with engineers from the Netherlands about how their country prioritizes the building of levees. In this way, Lee represents what the United States could learn from the policies of other countries, but the blame and responsibility for what happened because of Katrina remains within a national context in the film.

targeting conceptions of nature and ideas about the role race plays in oppression. Saro-Wiwa then brings into question those traditions, encouraging the American reader to accept more internationally-framed environmental justice perspectives that account for the situation of the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta, while simultaneously connecting their struggle to activists and aid organizations worldwide. In the process, Saro-Wiwa decenters an American understanding of injustice solely in the terms laid out by Lee—race and nation—and Saro-Wiwa expands the reach of environmental justice discourse to account for struggles in Nigeria and beyond.

Lessons from the Niger Delta: Reader Transformation in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day*

In *A Month and a Day*, Ken Saro-Wiwa mentions how a trip to Colorado reveals the benefits of combining environmental and social protest in a struggle against government and corporate power: “What the trip did was to convince me that the environment would have to be a strong plank on which to base the burgeoning Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People [MOSOP]” (54). The trip symbolizes a significant reference point for the comparison between an American environmental justice frame and Saro-Wiwa's framing of the injustices suffered by the Ogoni in the Niger Delta. Saro-Wiwa credits the trip with influencing how he positions the movement for the Ogoni people, and although he does not invoke an exclusively American audience, the text has particular significance for readers in the United States. The appeals that resonate specifically with an American reader call attention to how traditional conceptions of nature and race in the United States affect the level of awareness American activists have about global environmental justice struggles that focus on human considerations over nonhuman ones. Additionally, Saro-Wiwa shows how to expand an American environmental justice frame to account for the international scope his movement requires. The way Saro-Wiwa compiles *A Month and a Day* signals his expectation of various readers. Different moments in the text reveal different intended audiences: Nigerian, British, American, and other international readers associated with activist organizations like Greenpeace and PEN. Saro-Wiwa's negotiation of multiple readerships suggests that an American environmental justice frame travels only so far, and he demonstrates what alternate perspectives on nature, the environment, and the causes of oppression can add to that frame. In other words, he exposes the scalar limits of environmental justice framed solely within local and/or national contexts.

Appeals to an American Reader

Saro-Wiwa makes specific appeals that target an American reader and make her aware of the political and environmental threats the Ogoni people face in Nigeria. Saro-Wiwa utilizes certain mainstream perceptions about Africa and African people in order to make the reader comfortable with her knowledge base, and then he offers a counter-narrative about Nigeria and the Ogoni people that expands the reader's knowledge of the political, social, and economic policies that are devastating the environment of the Niger Delta. After describing the Delta in ways that compare to images of nature that align with mainstream environmental values, Saro-Wiwa then provides a different, re-imagined conception of nature that coincides with global environmental justice perspectives, which place humans squarely within the environment that needs preserving. Through the strategic use of "toxic discourse," Saro-Wiwa appeals to an American reader who will be receptive to the claims and solutions he provides.¹⁵ Saro-Wiwa frames certain aspects of the Ogoni movement in *A Month and a Day* to resonate with American practices: he combines environmental and social issues, he contextualizes vocabularies used in environmental racism struggles with the vocabulary of micro-minority rights, and he emphasizes the use of nonviolent means in the struggle. By using strategies recognizable to American readers, he gets their attention and sympathy, which sets the foundation for providing more radical notions that can then encourage the reader's transformation with less threat of alienation.

The importance of Saro-Wiwa's life's work cannot be overstated in relation to environmental justice. There are significant reasons why his prison diary, *A Month and a Day* (1995), fits within the parameters of this project in addition to his earlier writing, *Genocide in Nigeria* (1992), about the effects of oil exploration and extraction in the Niger Delta. *A Month and a Day* chronicles one time Saro-Wiwa spent detained in 1993 by the Nigerian government

¹⁵ In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Lawrence Buell defines toxic discourse generally as "expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency" (30-31).

headed by General Ibrahim Babangida. Saro-Wiwa was imprisoned again later under Nigeria's new military dictator, Sani Abacha, on trumped-up murder charges before being sentenced to death by a kangaroo court and summarily executed on November 10, 1995. The text includes a mix of genres including personal narrative, speeches, official documents, personal letters, and bible quotations. Saro-Wiwa's dominant personality lends coherence to the collection. *Genocide in Nigeria*, published three years prior to *A Month and a Day*, provides background about the Ogoni people. In *Genocide in Nigeria*, Saro-Wiwa summarizes the history of the Ogoni people and how the situation in the Niger Delta came to be the way it is. Once he establishes who the Ogoni are, Saro-Wiwa explains the history of British colonialism and its use of force to "unify" various ethnic groups in Nigeria. He chronicles Nigerian independence and points out that considerations of ethnic autonomy compared to national loyalty are especially crucial when discussing political structuring and resource allocation in Nigeria. Saro-Wiwa describes the Biafran Civil War and its effects on the Ogoni, and he demonstrates how ethnic majorities in Nigeria have "colonized" the minority groups for economic benefit. The second half of the text criticizes the behavior of Shell Oil Corporation in the Niger Delta for the environmental devastation and callous treatment of the local inhabitants of the region, and it outlines how the Nigerian national government is complicit in the genocide of the Ogoni and other ethnic minorities of the area. Saro-Wiwa concludes by calling on the international community to intervene on behalf of the Ogoni. The portrayal of Ogoniland in *Genocide in Nigeria* is significant for the various audiences Saro-Wiwa attracts.

The trajectory of Saro-Wiwa's writing from *Genocide in Nigeria* to *A Month and a Day* demonstrates an appeal to American readers and recognition that the transformation of that readership is crucial for his goals. The descriptions of the Niger Delta in *Genocide in Nigeria*

create images of an Eden-like environment with resources aplenty for all who live there. He focuses more on the ecosystem than on the people of the area, which resonates with images that readers associate with nature in Africa. Because Saro-Wiwa's main aim is to save Ogoni lives and preserve Ogoni culture, he appeals to aspects of African landscapes readers will recognize, and then he moves beyond those expected images to show the interconnection between the ecosystem and its human inhabitants, which pushes the reader to an expanded understanding of Africa and nature.

Key descriptions in *Genocide in Nigeria* and *A Month and a Day* represent an area full of lush vegetation, fertile agricultural land, and animal species, such as lions and antelopes, which appeal to readers' ideas about African nature. At the beginning of *Genocide in Nigeria*, Saro-Wiwa describes the landscape that is threatened by oil exploration: "What is of interest is that the Ogoni had inherited a precious part of God's earth and did everything to preserve it. The rich plateau soil provided agricultural plenty and the rivers which wash the borders of the entire area brimmed with fishes and sea food" (11-12). Saro-Wiwa creates images of a fertile and plentiful land that God has bestowed on the Ogoni and has entrusted them as its guardians.¹⁶ He returns to this aesthetic at the end of the text as well, which emphasizes the plants and animals of the ecosystem more than the human inhabitants:

I hear the plaintive cry of the Ogoni plains mourning the birds that no longer sing at dawn; I hear the dirge for trees whose branches wither in the blaze of gas flares, whose roots lie in infertile graves. The brimming streams gurgle no more, their harvest floats on waters poisoned by oil spillages. Where are the antelopes, the

¹⁶ See Andrew Apter's chapter "Death and the King's Henchmen," in his book, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*, for his explanation of Saro-Wiwa's descriptions of the Ogoni's relationship to the land in *Genocide in Nigeria* and how it constitutes honest labor compared to the oil industry's undermining of Nigeria's productive base of agriculture.

squirrels, the sacred tortoises, the snails, the lions and tigers which roamed this land? Where are the crabs, periwinkles, mudskippers, cockles, shrimps and all which found sanctuary in mudbanks, under the protective roots of mangrove trees? (*Genocide in Nigeria* 83)

Saro-Wiwa's personification of the plants and animals in the Niger Delta at the end of *Genocide in Nigeria* appeals to an environmentalism that focuses on the nonhuman ecosystem and brackets his human-centered argument in the text as a whole.

Saro-Wiwa maintains a similar approach in *A Month and a Day*. He paints a disturbing image of what has happened to the Niger Delta since the discovery of oil:

Oil exploration has turned Ogoni into a waste land...Mangrove forests have fallen to the toxicity of oil and are being replaced by noxious nypa and palms; the rainforest has fallen to the axe of the multinational oil companies; all wildlife is dead, marine life is gone, the farmlands have been rendered infertile by acid rain and the once beautiful Ogoni countryside is no longer a source of fresh air and green vegetables. All one sees and feels around is death. (*AMAD* 66-67)

Saro-Wiwa's statement about the Niger Delta bridges the divide between advocating for the Ogoni people and appealing to an international community of activists concerned with the plight of the planet. Saro-Wiwa's description displays a keen awareness of the identity of his reader: he starts with the effects oil has had on forests, wildlife, and marine life. He works within an expected narrative of Africa and the Niger Delta, replete with mangrove trees and rainforest. He then moves on to describe the way toxins have destroyed farmland and poisoned the air. No human subjects are present in his description; he represents the threat to food safety and thus

human survival through passive actions: forests “have fallen” to toxicity and the axe. He ends with death permeating the entire area. Saro-Wiwa demonstrates the connection among everything in nature. He emphasizes nonhuman elements and implicitly references the underlying human actions that affect the landscape.

Saro-Wiwa’s emphasis on the dire consequences toxins have had on forests and wildlife in *A Month and a Day* challenges the image many of his readers have of nature and African landscapes. Caminero-Santangelo and Myers, in their anthology on literary studies of African environments, *Environment at the Margins* [2011], explain that from traditional Western perspectives, Africa “has been and still is framed as a singularity constituted by absence—of time, civilization, or humanity—and this image has served to legitimate the exploitation of places and peoples in Africa” (8). Caminero-Santangelo and Myers suggest that for many Western readers, images of nature and particularly nature in Africa are devoid of human interference. Nature is pristine, it is pure, and it contains vegetation and mega-fauna that most Westerners access only through zoos or their imaginations. Saro-Wiwa disrupts the frame of absence and constructs a usable, if romanticized, past for the Ogoni that reflects the intersection among the environment, food security, and public health. He connects the culture of the Ogoni to the land and their use of it.¹⁷ Saro-Wiwa reassures his reader about his primary aim: “Let me state here, for the avoidance of all doubt, that my overall concern is for the fragile ecosystem of the Niger Delta—one of the richest areas on earth...I consider the loss of the Niger Delta a loss to all mankind and therefore regard Shell’s despoliation of the area as a crime to all humanity” (*AMAD* 112). His emphasis on the rich ecosystem satisfies readers who are interested in species

¹⁷ In the “Preface” to *A Month and a Day*, Saro-Wiwa states: “I should add that I have used the term ‘Ogoni’ in preference to ‘Ogoniland’, which is fast becoming current; this is because to the Ogoni, the land and the people are one and are expressed as such in our local languages. It emphasises, to my mind, the close relationship between the Ogoni people and their environment” (3).

preservation and conservation. But in addition to the aesthetically-motivated reason for saving it—it was once beautiful—he also infuses the Niger Delta with a human past that explains why it is crucial to Ogoni survival.

Saro-Wiwa's description of the Delta ecosystem appeals to a mainstream environmental sensibility, and his insistence on the area's importance to "all humanity" engages readers outside of Nigeria who share traditional Western conceptions of African nature, like international activists associated with groups such as the World Wildlife Fund. Saro-Wiwa's call-to-action about why this place matters to people who do not live in the Delta reflects his recognition that appealing to readers' values increases the opportunity for support of his cause. Saro-Wiwa provides a history for the land and the Ogoni that cannot be elided by the illusion of absence. Through his construction of this history, Saro-Wiwa shifts the values of the reader by skillfully demonstrating the way the Niger Delta is connected to the culture and basic survival of the Ogoni people and their way of life. And most importantly, he demonstrates what will be lost—for the Ogoni and people worldwide—if the Delta is not saved. Saro-Wiwa explains how the devastation of the Niger Delta means the eradication of Ogoni culture and livelihood. Saro-Wiwa provides the reader with additional information about African landscapes in order to encourage transformation through consideration of alternative representations of nature and environmental issues. The reader is more apt to accept his human-focused argument and to acknowledge its relevance to mainstream environmental ideas.

In addition to appealing to readers' assumptions about nature in order to then transform those images, Saro-Wiwa uses expectations about the role race plays in oppression to invoke what American readers recognize as causes of injustices. Saro-Wiwa appeals to the American reader by drawing attention to assumptions she has about oppression based on racial designation:

skin colour is not strong enough to stop the oppression of one group by another. Sometimes it reinforces oppression because it makes it less obvious. White people oppressing blacks in South Africa draws instant condemnation because it is seen to be racial. But black upon black oppression merely makes people shrug and say, ‘Well, its [sic] their business, isn’t it?’ (AMAD 127)

Saro-Wiwa’s use of the vocabulary of environmental racism to condemn Shell Oil Corporation connects with an American audience that recognizes the claim that the siting of toxic production often occurs in minority communities based on racist practices. Saro-Wiwa states, “Shell feels affronted that a black man, a black community has dared to challenge it; and it has shown the world that the company is an environmental threat in Nigeria, but not in Europe or America” (AMAD 106). Saro-Wiwa indicts Shell for considering the people of Africa to be less of a threat or worth less than the people in wealthier nations largely because of the color of their skin, which Saro-Wiwa asserts account for Shell’s adherence to different environmental regulations in Nigeria compared to America and Europe. The role racial difference plays in the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits in the United States has been documented, and many Americans acknowledge that race and its history in the United States play a significant role in people’s access to opportunities and healthy living conditions. For this reason, the American reader is likely to accept Saro-Wiwa’s claims against Shell because they coincide with a recognized environmental justice frame.

From Environmental Racism to Ethnic Micro-Minority Rights

In *A Month and a Day*, Saro-Wiwa represents how the oppression of the Ogoni fits within a recognized frame of unjust treatment based on skin color, and then he expands the reader’s

understanding of the causes of oppression in this particular situation. In the process, Saro-Wiwa shows that an environmental justice perspective that emphasizes race too exclusively is insufficient for explaining what is happening to the Ogoni and other micro-minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta. While Saro-Wiwa represents certain aspects associated with environmental movements in the United States, the particular situation in Nigeria reveals that some approaches to environmental injustices are not universal. Saro-Wiwa accuses Shell of racist practices, but he explains the problems of the Nigerian government and the disproportionate distribution of oil money from the perspective of ethnic conflict.

A Month and a Day contains language that acknowledges environmental racism on a global scale, but on the local level, Saro-Wiwa describes the injustice in terms of ethnic, and not racial, difference. The manner in which he frames the unjust treatment of the Ogoni by the national government differs from the vocabulary of environmental racism. Readers outside of Nigeria may be familiar with the names of dominant ethnic groups in the country—Igbo and Hausa-Fulani, for example—but it is unlikely that readers have a firm grasp on the history of the more than 250 ethnic groups that make up Nigeria. Many in the Western world may be unaware of the complicated colonial history of Nigeria and the process that brought together the diverse ethnic groups into a federation after Nigerian independence. Ethnic identification in Nigeria plays a significant role in where people live, and what access they have to land, resources, education, and other services. For people who belong to micro-minority groups, like the Ogoni, the opportunity to serve in government positions can be severely limited as people face discrimination based on ethnic origins. This lack of representation in politics and a political system that favors the tyranny of the majority over the (micro) minority lead to injustices on

distributive, procedural, and recognition levels.¹⁸ On the national level, Saro-Wiwa suggests these injustices are based on ethnic discrimination and greed.¹⁹

Saro-Wiwa's use of different vocabularies for explaining the causes of injustices by the Nigerian government and Shell Oil Corporation is a significant point for how his approach differs from a traditional American environmental justice frame. The situation for the Ogoni and other micro-minorities in the Niger Delta signals the limits of framing injustice only through the lens of environmental racism; but simultaneously Saro-Wiwa shows that on an international scale, the language of race remains pertinent. His use of arguments based on race and ethnicity make a case that various approaches are needed depending on the scalar level being appealed to. By presenting arguments based on both race and ethnicity to explain the exploitation of the Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa encourages the reader to have a broader understanding of what contributes to environmental injustices worldwide. Saro-Wiwa's appeals to various audiences differ significantly from an American environmental justice frame as exemplified by Lee. Lee explicitly targets an American viewership, and although Saro-Wiwa recognizes the importance of American readers, he does not consider them his only aim. Saro-Wiwa's arguments reinforce the need for flexibility and for environmental justice frames that can encompass multiple and varied considerations depending on the situation.

Multiple Readerships

¹⁸ Gordon Walker explains three categories of justice in his book, *Environmental Justice*. Distributive justice refers to the allocation of benefits and burdens (41-42); procedural justice indicates the institutional contexts that determine distribution, particularly in relation to the decision making process in government, such as who has the right to be heard and included (47-48); and justice as recognition refers to how some people or groups are devalued in comparison to others or rendered invisible through cultural representation (50-51).

¹⁹ In "Sweet and Sour," Michael Watts clarifies why Saro-Wiwa positions the Ogoni and Ogoni State the way he does in *A Month and a Day*. He explains how Nigerian law endorses cultural identity as the basis for political identity so access to oil wealth is fought over in terms of ethnicity (41). Watts traces the history of oil discovery in Nigeria and explains how politics, capitalism, ethnicity, petroleum, and corruption mingle in Nigeria to produce a cursed society that has dissolved into violence and unimaginable poverty for the majority of its citizens.

The form of *A Month and a Day* reflects Saro-Wiwa's effort to disseminate information for different audiences through multiple rhetorical strategies. The pacing of the text reveals the urgency of the situation for Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni, and the different types of information and genres Saro-Wiwa includes in the text lend longevity to the material after his death. Saro-Wiwa creates dialogue among various types of information about the Ogoni situation. He controls the placement of different sources in the text—such as speeches and the Ogoni Bill of Rights—and his construction of the text frames the information to point toward whom and what entities Saro-Wiwa views as responsible for the problems and those who are integral to their solutions. Crucial to Saro-Wiwa's approach that privileges dialogue across scales and organizations is his awareness of the various parties implicated in the causes and solutions for the Ogoni situation.

Saro-Wiwa utilizes elements common in fiction to construct a narrative that has enduring literary value in addition to instrumental importance. The multiple genres Saro-Wiwa includes in the text, such as bible verses, excerpts from Shell documents, and personal letters between Saro-Wiwa and his friends and family, produce a flexible narrative that aims to connect different readers with *at least* one part of the text. The fact that all of the elements Saro-Wiwa uses to construct his narrative reinforce the same argument serves as a testament to his ability as a writer, even while under great pressure and duress. Saro-Wiwa stitches together the various pieces through maneuvers reminiscent of his fictional writing days. He writes, "Now as I lay idle in an illegal detention, my thoughts went over my endeavors [to improve the life of the Ogoni people] in this regard through the years" (39). This move at the beginning of chapter four allows Saro-Wiwa to include context for the reader who may be unfamiliar with the intricacies of the situation in Nigeria, the history of the civil war, and the question of ethnic rights. Saro-Wiwa "flashes back" to a pamphlet he published in 1969, *The Ogoni Nationality Today and Tomorrow*.

He includes passages from that pamphlet and then provides his present-day commentary on the earlier text. This leads him to reminisce about the book he wrote when the civil war ended in 1979 and the occasion of its publication in 1990 allowed him to make a speech about the future of Nigeria that he also includes in the text. The rest of the chapter continues in the same vein, with Saro-Wiwa getting the reader up-to-date on his writings about the situation in the Niger Delta and the movement for the Ogoni people. By constructing the text in this way, Saro-Wiwa effectively interrupts the narrative of his detention in order to provide the reader necessary background information for understanding why international support is crucial at this time: local and national avenues have been exhausted in their attempts to convince the oil companies and the Babangida and Abacha regimes that the injustices against the ethnic minorities must be remedied.

Saro-Wiwa's flexibility as a writer and his use of the nonfiction genre contribute to how the reader identifies with the seriousness of the issues facing the Ogoni. The timeliness of a situation plays a large role in what genre most effectively captures environmental justice issues. When urgent attention and action is necessary, appeals through nonfiction essays, journalistic accounts, or texts like Saro-Wiwa's can effectively reach an international audience more immediately than if the injustices were represented through fictional means.²⁰ The intermingling of the prison diary with political tracts about the Ogoni situation makes the reader acutely aware of the stakes for Saro-Wiwa. The risks involved when writing nonfiction are higher, particularly in a non-democratic society. The American reader does not live in a society where an author can be killed by the government for what he writes. Saro-Wiwa makes the reader understand the dangers of writing against the military regime, and in addition to the celebrity he gains as an

²⁰ The activist's writing abilities and personal preference play a role as well in the genre chosen to dispel the message of the movement.

environmental activist, Saro-Wiwa becomes a symbol for people who defend freedom of expression. The nonfiction medium allows Saro-Wiwa to communicate explicitly what the international community, and the American reader, should do to help the effort. The reader of *A Month and a Day* leaves the text with a better grasp of what needs to happen on multiple scales to help the ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta.

The reader who encounters the text almost 20 years after Saro-Wiwa's death still learns how to negotiate key elements of environmental justice struggles worldwide. The constructed nature of the text, particularly the editions released after Saro-Wiwa's death that include a forward by Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, the statement Saro-Wiwa was prevented from reading on the day of his execution, letters of condolence to his family, and letters his son, Ken Wiwa, writes to his father five and ten years after the execution, lend a longevity to the text that enables it to be timely years later. Saro-Wiwa's role as a writer-activist has been thoroughly examined by Nixon, but it is worth noting here how Saro-Wiwa views his chosen profession: "For the word is power and more powerful is it when expressed in common currency. That is why a writer who takes part in mass organisations will deliver his message more effectively than one who writes waiting for time to work its literary wonders" (55). Saro-Wiwa composes *A Month and a Day* largely from his experiences with people committed to the Ogoni cause, which help explain the success he has disseminating his message. In the text, he includes whole speeches that he gave at Ogoni rallies, which indicate his appeals to Nigerian readers as well.²¹

²¹ Apter suggests that Nigerians would have been an audience for Saro-Wiwa's writings. He argues that Saro-Wiwa's demand for political recognition and autonomy for the Ogoni, which originally were ignored by the majority of Nigerians, gained new relevance once Abacha took over leadership of the country. According to Apter, the collapse of civil society mirrored the meltdown of the oil economy and the depreciation of the naira, which motivated Nigerians to question how the false wealth of oil ruined the Nigerian nation. Apter claims that Saro-Wiwa's solution for the Ogoni became one that many other Nigerians identified with as the economic and political situation in the country deteriorated.

Global Environmental Justice Frames

Saro-Wiwa's appeals to various audiences signal a difference between his approach and an American environmental justice frame that assigns blame, responsibility, and solutions within a national context. Analysis of additional issues in environmental justice scholarship highlights how Saro-Wiwa positions the struggle for Ogoni rights from global perspectives. Saro-Wiwa develops strategies that simultaneously celebrate local activism and attract international support, and change the way the reader views her role in global issues.

Saro-Wiwa represents the Ogoni struggle as one with locally specific concerns, but he emphasizes the globally-connecting elements—greed, oil, and justice—being fought over in order to demonstrate the role international readers have in helping to alleviate the problem.²² Saro-Wiwa shows that the common denominator between the Nigerian government and Shell Oil Corporation is greed, which surfaces from one source: oil. The conditions in Nigeria are particular, but the interests and values have global repercussions. Saro-Wiwa stresses the international implications of the Ogoni movement, and his call for Ogoni autonomy suggests that the struggle for micro-minority rights and the strategies and vocabularies used to achieve those could transfer across contexts. Clifford Bob, in “The Quest for International Allies,” analyzes the strategies local social movements use to attract international backing: “To improve their chances of gaining support, local movements also conform themselves to the needs and expectations of potential backers in Western nations. They simplify and universalize their claims, making them relevant to the broader missions and interests of key global players” (355). Bob suggests that

²² Apter describes the main actors in the Ogoni tragedy. He includes “the American, European, and Japanese markets for Nigerian oil, those impersonal consumers who drive the global oil economy but remain largely in the background” (260).

while local movements may risk losing some of their flexibility and specificity, the advantages to universalizing their claims for global support outweigh what may be lost in the process.

In addition to universalizing claims to attract broader support, local movements aim to display a united front among their members and goals. For the reader, a cohesive struggle is more appealing than one plagued by division and disagreement. Saro-Wiwa's development of Ogoni consciousness relies on the construction of a romanticized Ogoni history and assumptions about the Ogoni people. First, he presents the Ogoni as a unified group with similar goals and an agreed upon way to achieve them; second, he removes the Ogoni from the larger culture of Nigeria and implies that they have not been influenced by the corruption and prospects of "free money" that they have witnessed in others; lastly, he indicates that the transformation in Ogoni collective consciousness would be replicable for others:²³

Certainly, what we have done for the Ogoni can be done for other groups in Nigeria, in Africa. Its importance lies in the fact that a small ethnic group has not only been prepared psychologically to confront its history and take its fortune into its own hands, but is prepared to take on its oppressors in the form of the nation-state and multi-national giant. (*AMAD* 132-133)

Saro-Wiwa's mobilization of the Ogoni is a remarkable feat, but his representation of the successes of the movement in the text cover up some of the divisions among Ogoni leaders and the people themselves. For Saro-Wiwa, determining who and what are good and bad is easy in the text; in reality, this delineation is much more complicated. But for Saro-Wiwa's purposes—

²³ The ideas for this aspect of my argument come out of Byron Caminero-Santangelo's graduate seminars on postcolonial ecocriticism and environmentalism of the poor and the Global South. My thinking was additionally influenced by his article, "Of Freedom and Oil: Nation, Globalization, and Civil Liberties in the Writing of Ken Saro-Wiwa."

generating a collective history and motive spirit to struggle against the degradation of their livelihood and land—this glossing over of divisions may be necessary. The coherence of Saro-Wiwa's text and the unified front he implies MOSOP has reflect Bob's claims that groups often frame their struggles in ways most likely to attract broader support.

Saro-Wiwa suggests that Ogoni genius will solve the problems in the Niger Delta, and he insists that outside pressure will be necessary to convince the Nigerian government to allow Ogoni autonomy. While he frames his argument in terms of its global implications, Saro-Wiwa represents the situation in the Niger Delta in relation to the specific consequences it has for the Ogoni. He acknowledges that other micro-minorities in Nigeria suffer from similar injustices, but he aims to improve the lives and land of his people. He suggests that the Ogoni possess the ability to avoid the corruption that has plagued the other ethnic groups that have been in power. Saro-Wiwa proposes Ogoni genius—their self-sufficiency and reliance—as the means to stave off the greed of easy money and luxurious lifestyles that the petro-culture fosters. Saro-Wiwa explains that “the only thing that will save the Ogoni people is the achievement of political autonomy accompanied by, among others, the right to use a fair proportion of Ogoni resources for the development of Ogoni—its education, health, agriculture and culture” (51).

Saro-Wiwa's negotiation of nationally-specific and global implications demonstrates the need for dialogue across multiple scales. Additionally, in order to combat the economic, political, and social forces that sustain environmental injustices worldwide, dialogue among government, activist, and corporate organizations becomes necessary. Watts indicates that global systems themselves will need to change before the injustices that accompany oil markets can be assuaged. In “Violent Environments,” Watts explains how oil became part of the nation-building process in Nigeria. He is interested in the relation of oil to contemporary capitalism and United

States hegemony and whether or not oil hinders democracy (277-278). He explores “how oil capitalism produces particular sorts of enclave economies and particular sorts of governable spaces characterized by violence and instability” (278). Watts explicitly places a large portion of the responsibility on the transnational oil companies: he asserts that they have played a large role in the increased violence and hostage taking that plagues the Niger Delta, and he argues that they need to rethink what counts as responsible business practice (“Sweet and Sour” 47).

Watts’ analysis emphasizes the specific factors in Nigeria that contributed to the development of the “exploit-and-abandon culture” and implies that the solutions for Nigeria may not be the same for other countries whose history, politics, and demographics are different (“Sweet and Sour” 36). His evaluation of the situation in Nigeria suggests that the oil complex does not develop universally across all countries, but the particular combination of politics, economics, and history in Nigeria led to the corrupted state that exists now. His conclusions about the petro-culture in Nigeria complicate Saro-Wiwa’s plans for the Ogoni movement to be a model for all of Africa. This suggests some degree of local autonomy must be retained by environmental justice movements. Watts and Saro-Wiwa also imply global support attuned to specific situations can be achieved through dialogue and that outside alliances will be integral to the successes of local movements. According to Watts and Saro-Wiwa, the global scale of the problems the Ogoni face—multinational oil corporations, a national government that infringes on basic human rights, an interdependent economic system that creates vast inequalities, and the legacy of colonialism that places hundreds of ethnic groups in one country with skin color as the sole commonality—necessitates an international response to remedy the injustices. The conclusion that the struggle is too entwined with larger systems to fight only on a local front demonstrates how Saro-Wiwa positions the movement in relation to scalar tensions.

Different Types of Justice

Saro-Wiwa represents injustices that occur nationally and coincide with Walker's three classifications of justice—distributive, procedural, and recognition. Injustices occur from the way the benefits and burdens of oil are allocated in Nigeria. Saro-Wiwa argues for a redistribution of oil money to those ethnic groups whose environment is most adversely affected by the exploration and extraction of oil. In addition to distributive injustice, Saro-Wiwa points out how the Ogoni and other ethnic micro-minorities in Nigeria suffer from procedural injustice and injustice of recognition. On the procedural level—who can be heard—the Ogoni have few representatives in government and thus little chance of instituting their demands on a legal or political front. Saro-Wiwa quotes Mr. Asiodu, the Minister of Petroleum in Nigeria, ““Given the small size and population of the oil-producing areas, it is not cynical to observe that even if the resentment of oil-producing states continue, they cannot threaten the stability of the country or affect its continued economic development”” (*AMAD* 101-102). Asiodu's statement confirms the procedural difficulties the Ogoni and other micro-minorities in the Delta face within the Nigerian government. The statement also points toward a problem of recognition among the smaller ethnic groups in the country. Because of their few numbers, the Ogoni do not matter to the Nigerian government and are easily sacrificed to the petro-dollars promised by despoiling the region for more oil profits.

These examples demonstrate how the three types of injustice occur at the national level, but Saro-Wiwa also represents them on a global scale, which he insists require international intervention to redress. Saro-Wiwa charges Shell with injustice in the realm of recognition, or the devaluation of some people in comparison to others. He claims that Shell operates with different standards in Nigeria compared to its practices in Europe and the United States: “Shell does not

spend as much on environmental protection, salaries and health care as it does in other countries where the company operates” (*AMAD* 128). Saro-Wiwa accuses Shell of inconsistent practices because it views Africans with less respect and of little worth compared to their Northern and Western counterparts. Saro-Wiwa challenges the international community to confront the crisis of representation that leads the Ogoni and other Africans to experience injustices of recognition, and he does this by offering a different image of African people: the politically-transformed Ogoni.

The difficulty Saro-Wiwa has making his case heard by international aid organizations reflects the injustice the Ogoni people face on a procedural level. Saro-Wiwa provides examples of failed attempts to attract support so the reader can avoid the responses made by some international groups. Saro-Wiwa encourages the reader to recognize the lack of interest by those organizations as callous and uncaring and to adopt the perspective endorsed by him. The initial appeals by Saro-Wiwa to Greenpeace and Amnesty International fell on deaf ears because the Ogoni were being killed in an unconventional way and did not meet Amnesty’s requirements for aid. According to Saro-Wiwa, Greenpeace flatly refused to work in Africa (*AMAD* 61). The lack of concern by Greenpeace for people in Africa is chilling, and the difficulty of representing the ecological violence against humans in a way that resonates with international aid organizations points toward the lack of avenues available to environmental justice movements at the time Saro-Wiwa writes.²⁴ In his memoir, *In the Shadow of a Saint*, Saro-Wiwa’s son, Ken Wiwa, elaborates on the difficulties his father had convincing international organizations about the atrocities being committed against the Ogoni:

²⁴ Caminero-Santangelo (“Of Freedom and Oil”) and Nixon (“Environmentalism and Postcolonialism”) note that Saro-Wiwa eventually won over Greenpeace and Amnesty International and “contributed to important developments within such organizations” (Caminero-Santangelo 300).

The eyes on the other side of the table would glaze over as my father began to explain the United Nations definition of genocide as ‘the commission of acts with intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.’ My father would soon be shown the door with a polite but condescending look that suggested he come back when a few more people had been killed. (52)

In terms of garnering international awareness and aid to the environmental violence being committed against the Ogoni and in practicing nonviolent means to fight those injustices, Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP forge new ground. They encounter the troubles that meet groundbreakers, such as how to frame their struggle in ways that would attract interest among outside groups and how to sustain nonviolent practices in the face of harsh environmental, governmental, and military violence in response to their efforts. While attending a workshop at a meeting of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization [UNPO] on nonviolent struggle, Saro-Wiwa explains the procedural difficulties he meets, “I also introduced him [a Palestinian] to another type of violence: environmental degradation; and I did ask whether there was anything in the books as to how it could be confronted in a non-violent manner. No-one, it appeared, had ever thought of it” (95). By including these examples, Saro-Wiwa positions the reader to avoid the ignorance Amnesty International and Greenpeace initially had regarding the plight of the Ogoni people.

Saro-Wiwa outlines political, economic, and environmental rights as essential for Ogoni survival, and he recognizes that the Ogoni people will need international support in order to secure those rights. He does not want to alienate international supporters or suggest they have no say in the matter, but he argues that local groups, like the Ogoni, should have self-determination and the autonomy to make their own decisions about their land and livelihood. He made the

following Call to Commitment at the launch of the One Naira Ogoni Survival Fund (ONOSUF) in February, 1993:

Our goal has been set out in the Ogoni Bill of Rights, where we underlined our determination to achieve political autonomy, the right to use our economic resources for our development, the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation and the right to adequate and direct representation *as of right* in all Nigerian national institutions. (AMAD 98 emphasis original)

Saro-Wiwa shows the reader that environmental considerations cannot be separated from political, economic, and social matters. In this way, Saro-Wiwa not only reframes environmentalism for the reader, but he also reframes who should have the power to determine the most effective ways for dealing with particular situations.

Reasons for Hope

Saro-Wiwa's experiences among the Ogoni people and his ability to converse in "common currency" bolster his challenge to the official authority of Shell and demonstrate how he represents local knowledge operating for the Ogoni movement. He undertakes the task of re-imagining categories outside of the ones already at the reader's disposal in order to shift the narrative from one that favors oil corporations and global economic markets to perspectives that emphasize socioecological values in addition to monetary interests. Saro-Wiwa artfully juxtaposes these drastically different positions in order to gain the moral high ground: the reader must question what price tag can be put on people's culture, their means of sustenance, and their lives. The matter is life and death to Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni while Shell's stakes in the

situation are driven by profit. Saro-Wiwa uses the emotional weight of the Ogoni position to change the narrative from economic logic only to one that considers other costs.

Saro-Wiwa questions the way scientific expertise can be used to substantiate official accounts for a corporation's benefit, to shirk responsibility, and to maximize profits. He includes in the text a "Briefing Note" that Shell issued: "Shell 'has conducted environmental impact studies on new developments in recent years, and has in place a five-year environmental plan for improving earlier and older installations'" (AMAD 108). In response, Saro-Wiwa states, "I challenge Shell to show the public what environmental impact assessment it conducted in Nigeria prior to 1993" (111). Saro-Wiwa's open invitation to Shell undercuts its "Briefing Note" by disputing the very existence of the studies. Saro-Wiwa raises questions about Shell's expert information and the authority granted to its statements. Throughout the text, Saro-Wiwa reminds the reader of the dismal record Shell has in Nigeria, and he encourages the reader to be skeptical of the assertions Shell makes about its actions and responsibility in the devastation of the Niger Delta.

In contrast to the skepticism Saro-Wiwa raises about Shell's sincerity in its official statements, Saro-Wiwa champions the local knowledge of the Ogoni. He celebrates the history the Ogoni have with the land and suggests their knowledge, self-reliance, and autonomy will save the area and the people from devastation. He believes that if given their proper restitution for the damage that has already been done and if allowed control over the stewardship of Ogoni state, the Ogoni people would avoid the environmental destruction that Shell has inflicted on the Niger Delta and would be able to return to their agricultural-based lifestyle. In the pamphlet, *The Ogoni Nationality Today and Tomorrow*, Saro-Wiwa describes what these stewards will be like:

They will provide enlightened and dynamic leadership; they will, with active support, ensure that our nationality regains its lost dignity and honour, and transform our land for the betterment of our peoples. It is incumbent on us to entrust the future of our land to responsible persons who know what is going on in the world around them, and who will not succumb to petty inducements. (*AMAD* 40-41)

He positions the reader to accept that Ogoni genius will solve the problems that the petro-culture has caused in Nigeria.²⁵

To show readers the potential Ogoni genius holds, Saro-Wiwa represents the One Naira Ogoni Survival Fund. Through the process of re-imagining Ogoni history, he achieves one of his biggest accomplishments: the transformation of the Ogoni people from mostly unengaged individuals into a knowledgeable, politically-active collective force in Nigeria. He mobilizes the group to participate in marches, nonviolent protests, and speeches in such large numbers that the government of Nigeria can no longer ignore the Ogoni demands. Saro-Wiwa exemplifies the transformative process through the Fund, which demonstrates the promise of Ogoni autonomy. He concludes that they would behave differently than the Nigerians now in control of oil money. The Fund undertakes the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Ogoni land. Saro-Wiwa describes its purpose: “In establishing this fund, we want to emphasise not money but the symbols of togetherness, of comradeship, of unity of endeavor, of the total commitment of young and old...all Ogoni...will contribute to the Fund as a statement of their will to survive as individuals

²⁵ The perspective that the local people know what is best for their land and resources coincides with aspects of wise-use environmental discourse explained by David Harvey: Proponents of wise use oppose federal regulation of private property and believe the right to jobs must take precedence over the rights of nature. The degree of autonomy and control allocated to local communities reveals some promising ties between this perspective and environmental justice. According to Harvey, the wise-use view has been powerfully co-opted by corporate and industrial interests, but it has a sufficient democratic and populist edge that it deserves serious consideration (385).

and as one indivisible nation” (99). The Fund emphasizes the moral authority of the Ogoni cause more than the goal of raising money: it represents solidarity against the dehumanization of people in which everyone can invest. Through the Fund, Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni imagine a different relationship to money and to one another; out of the crisis that has befallen their land and people, the Ogoni act with “unforeseen sociability and collectivity” (Peets, Robbins, and Watts 41). They develop an alternative to the status quo in Nigeria. Instead of the divisiveness and greed that corrupts the federal government, they choose local autonomy based on togetherness and sharing.

The Fund subverts the power of the few and places it in the many. In essence, Saro-Wiwa represents the Fund as helping to produce a different kind of Ogoni subject: one whose identity is associated with certain social, political, and environmental practices as opposed to the activities and attitudes that have been normalized by the corrupt practices of the Nigerian government. The Fund signifies an alternative relationship to the environment produced through other social and economic logics (Peets, Robbins, and Watts 30). Saro-Wiwa explains the powerful changes he witnessed, “That day, 4 January, was a truly liberation day [sic]: a day on which young and old, able and disabled, rich and poor, all of Ogoni came out to reassert themselves and to give notice that the nation had come of age—that it would not accept its destruction passively. We had surmounted the psychological barrier of fear. Ogoni would never be the same again” (92). Saro-Wiwa represents the potential for changing the narrative of economic and political structures beyond individual and community levels to national and global scales. He shows the reader that if the Ogoni can change in such profound ways, then the potential to transform other subjects exists.

Saro-Wiwa constructs a different image of Nigeria for the reader and in the process, he changes the way the reader imagines Africa, the environment, and activism. The Fund serves as an important moment in the text where Saro-Wiwa explicitly calls on the international community. He states that the Fund will not accept donations from any government in Nigeria but will accept money from friends at home *and abroad*. He represents a different kind of politically-organized group in Nigeria than the corrupt military government that the international audience is accustomed to; he appeals to the support and dedication of concerned international citizens who value the ideals that the Fund symbolizes.

Saro-Wiwa represents moral authority resting on the Ogoni side, and the vocabulary of basic human rights becomes part of the narrative shift he employs. Saro-Wiwa describes what the Ogoni are up against: “And that all the guns of the world, the casuistry of dictatorship and the threat of death and imprisonment cannot deter a people determined to secure their God-given rights and protect their inheritance” (100). He argues that nothing will stand in the way of the Ogoni demanding justice. Saro-Wiwa recognizes the risks and violent means the Ogoni may face, which he realizes his small group cannot match. This is why his insistence, throughout the text, on a nonviolent approach to the struggle serves as one of the greatest strengths of Saro-Wiwa’s strategies. The Ogoni are no match for the military dictatorship in terms of arms and sheer numbers, but their commitment to nonviolence places them in a morally superior position, particularly in relation to attracting outside sympathy. And the nonviolent tactics used by MOSOP share similarities with the Civil Rights movement in the United States and other peaceful struggles conducted worldwide, which places the Ogoni movement alongside those counterparts in terms of moral power.

Limitations of Saro-Wiwa's Frame

Saro-Wiwa employs successful strategies in his representation of the Ogoni movement in *A Month and a Day*, but there were limitations to his approach as well. While this reading suggests that Saro-Wiwa effectively appeals to an American reader in certain regards, it acknowledges that Saro-Wiwa's solutions do not take into account fully how American readers perceive themselves and their country's role in the world. Beyond "relying upon ourselves and our genius," (149) and his representation of the One Naira Ogoni Survival Fund, Saro-Wiwa does not fully reconcile how the Ogoni people he champions will avoid the pitfalls of corruption and "petty inducements" that have befallen the other ethnic groups in power in Nigeria. According to Caminero-Santangelo, in order to mobilize the Ogoni and attract international sympathy to their cause, Saro-Wiwa crafts an a-historical narrative of the Ogoni people that removes them from the ever-changing culture around them. He positions the reader to believe that the Ogoni movement is a united front that shares the same goals and means for achieving them. He also represents the Ogoni as people who are immune to the present influences around them, such as the promises of "free money" that oil reparations would provide. He claims that Ogoni genius—their self-reliance and local knowledge—will resist the temptation of the fairy tale of oil ("Of Freedom and Oil" 300).²⁶ But the text alludes to the fact that there were Ogoni who disagreed with some of Saro-Wiwa's tactics and solutions. This conflict within the text, which Saro-Wiwa smoothes over but does acknowledge, raises questions for the reader. The reader may recognize the disproportionate burden of other dimensions of distribution—vulnerability, need, and responsibility—that fall on the Ogoni, and she may agree that something needs to be done to help alleviate their suffering, but she may question whether a

²⁶ In "Sweet and Sour," Michael Watts quotes Ryszard Kapuscinski about the fairy tale of oil: "Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free... The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident... In this sense oil is a fairy tale and, like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie" (37).

redistribution of funds without profound changes in the power structure and economic culture of Nigeria and transnational oil companies can achieve the desired results. For the reader, this argument may be difficult to accept: what will prevent the Ogoni from reverting to similar power and class hierarchies to which other ethnic groups in Nigeria and international corporations currently adhere?

The distributive injustice in Nigeria is not merely a local manifestation; it stems from global distributive inequalities reinforced by the “logic” of capitalism and counted on by multinational corporations that profit from the disparities. But Saro-Wiwa’s treatment of distributive inequality inherent in the economic system on a global scale is not as substantial. He represents the disparity between the riches enjoyed by certain ethnic groups in Nigeria and the damages incurred by other ethnic minorities as institutionally condoned, but Apter points out that Saro-Wiwa does not address the coalition of economic elite that cross ethnic lines: “Saro-Wiwa’s nearly exclusive focus on ethnic politics and clientism was one-sided, overlooking the development of class factions and what Bayart (1993, 150-79) calls ‘the reciprocal assimilation of elites’ on transethnic grounds” (266). In other words, Saro-Wiwa neglects to account for the cooperation by wealthy ethnic majorities across ethnic lines and in collusion with transnational corporations to remain in power through class-warfare against the minorities of the Niger Delta. While Saro-Wiwa’s focus on ethnic factors is essential to his movement, like some frames that focus too exclusively on race at the expense of other considerations, Saro-Wiwa’s disregard for class in combination with ethnic designation demonstrates a shortcoming of his approach and the problem that arises when one ignores economic status globally and locally in situations of environmental injustice. Saro-Wiwa argues that the solution to the local inequalities would be a redistribution of money to those people who lives and land are most affected by oil exploration

and extraction. This solution is complicated by the knowledge that not only ethnic difference needs to be addressed but class hierarchies as well. If the solutions Saro-Wiwa propose work within global systems and structures, including economic ones, that contribute to the problems in the first place, then can positive change occur without transforming the systems themselves?

The eventual outcomes—Saro-Wiwa’s execution and the continued violence and devastation in the Niger Delta—make it necessary to acknowledge the limitations of what Saro-Wiwa could do in his appeals for support. He cannot openly threaten the lifeblood of Nigeria. If he were to call for a complete stop to oil extraction and a removal of all oil companies from the area, he would lose both local and international backing. Although Saro-Wiwa frames the Ogoni struggle in ways that appeal to Western audiences, his solutions may not have taken into account fully how the Western world views Africa. Saro-Wiwa may have been correct when he stated: “I am still to be convinced that the West and their multinational corporations want African progress. They want Africa to remain at their feet” (132). If Saro-Wiwa is accurate about how the West regards Africa—as a rich repository of resources to be extracted—then no matter how successfully the argument is framed, the prospect for remedying injustices will not happen until global civil society and economic systems are transformed.

Saro-Wiwa represents a local environmental justice movement that garnered international attention, and his writing in *A Month and a Day* serves as a foundational example of global environmental justice discourse. The limitations of an American environmental justice frame that Saro-Wiwa’s text exposes does not suggest the need to abandon the particular focus that has been effective for many environmental justice movements. Instead it proposes thinking about frames that cross different scales. At one point, Saro-Wiwa suggests a compromise between Shell and MOSOP: “Shell should adopt the path of dialogue. MOSOP has left its doors open for

such dialogue. In the interest of both parties” (113). It seems that one of the most important tasks environmental justice scholarship can encourage is the creation of cross-cultural and transnational dialogue that acknowledges differences and contradictions while striving toward a shared humanity.

The next chapter examines another human-produced environmental disaster caused by a transnational corporation, but one that is represented through fictional means in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*.

Decentering an American Activist: Global Environmental Justice in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

I hope and trust that my America, having become a global threat, can also become a global hope as so often it has been

--Erazim Kohák

Erazim Kohák's statement in *The Green Halo* about "my America" as both a global threat and global hope relies on his faith that attitudes and practices can be changed. While Kohák acknowledges, along with many others, that the consumer-driven society in the United States overwhelmingly contributes to the problems the world faces today, he simultaneously believes that it has the potential to help reverse the trend toward ever-increasing consumption and environmental degradation. Indra Sinha's novel, *Animal's People*, identifies the United States as a source of environmental disasters outside the country's own borders. The way poverty and other social considerations relate to the distribution of burdens is precisely what environmental justice movements seek to address. Viewed from this perspective, the link between Sinha's novel and Kohák's statement suggests that global practices pose threats to those least able to afford the consequences. Kohák optimistically proposes that the perpetrators of those threats are also integral to the solutions, but Sinha's novel challenges Kohák's avowal. Sinha explicitly connects poverty and global practices in his novel, and he uses the protagonist, Animal, and the American character, Elli Barber, to represent the relationship between local and global movements. Sinha suggests that hope resides in local activists' efforts and that global systems themselves—economic, political, and legal—will have to change in order for international movements to be part of the solution.

The premise for Sinha's novel is the chemical disaster in Bhopal, India. In December 1984 an explosion occurred at the Union Carbide factory that sent methyl isocyanate gas and

other toxins into the air. The estimates for those immediately killed vary from four to fifteen thousand, and in the subsequent years, many more thousands of deaths and life-threatening disabilities have been linked to exposure to the cloud (Nixon 448). Sinha sets his novel twenty years after the explosion and creates the fictional city of Khaufpur to represent Bhopal. The novel is told from the first-person perspective of Animal, who is orphaned as a baby the night of the factory explosion. The delayed effects of the chemicals released into the air “that night” eventually bend his spine forward so that he walks on all fours. He narrates his experiences to a tape recorder given to him by an Australian journalist, and his narrative includes the backstory to his life, the court battle over who is responsible for the explosion and its lingering effects, the arrival of an American doctor, Elli Barber, to set up a medical clinic, and the multiple day-to-day activities, including love and sex, that preoccupy the teenaged-boy’s mind. Animal repeatedly refers to “that night,” which serves as a shorthand reference to the event that initiated many of the problems the characters face.

Sinha uses Elli’s character to challenge local, national, and international policies and attitudes about environmental regulations, corporate actions, and individual responsibility. Sinha crafts Elli as a liminal character straddling the border between the “evil” corporation and the people of Khaufpur. By occupying this liminal space, Elli represents the possibility for dialogue and potential solutions. She complicates the symbol of America in the novel as only the indefensible chemical company and signifies an American figure who does not fully understand the complexity of the situation when she arrives but transforms into someone receptive to alternative perspectives. Unlike Piya in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, Elli already advocates for environmental justice, but similarly to the way Ghosh crafts his protagonist, Sinha represents Elli as needing to decenter her American perspective in relation to the local community and

movement. Both authors represent their characters as developing an environmental double-consciousness, whereas they acquire an awareness of how others view them, their country, and their individual and collective roles in the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Elli eventually recognizes her position as an outsider with the capacity to help but not to control the situation. Her experiences in Khaufpur and her misunderstandings about the culture and the people show the reader how some approaches to environmental problems can be out of tune with local needs and practices. Through the course of the novel, Elli represents what the process of negotiation between American activists and local environmental justice movements could look like. In short, Sinha produces an American figure who learns from and responds to the needs of the local population.

By the end of the novel, Elli embraces customs and modes of humor that enable her to intervene strategically in the local movement's fight. This reading does not suggest that Elli is the savior in the novel; Animal occupies an in-between space as well, and it is his friendship with Elli that becomes necessary for negotiating the problems the people of Khaufpur face. While this analysis will focus on Elli's character, for the novel as a whole Sinha suggests that it is not individuals alone but dedicated activists and local communities who can have the most impact when trying to rectify injustices.

Sinha challenges dominant narratives throughout the novel in order to decenter mainstream representations of environmental disasters. He invents a framing device: before the first chapter, the reader encounters an Editor's Note that describes the source of the narrative that follows. According to the note, Animal has narrated his story in Hindi and per his agreement with the journalist who gave him the tape recorder, "the story is told entirely in the boy's words...Apart from translating to English, nothing has been changed." From the start, Sinha's

novel raises questions of form and is positioned in relation to the issue of constructivist and realist representation. Sinha's technique provides the illusion of immediacy between Animal and the reader. This illusion is instantly complicated by the acknowledgement that the story has been translated from Hindi to English. Furthermore, the reader eventually learns that these tapes were not recorded as the events were taking place but are memories recounted by Animal years later. Sinha constantly plays with the idea of immediacy. Animal addresses the readers as "Eyes" and confronts them about their expectations for the story he should tell: "You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always of the same story...No way was I going to tell those stories" (5). Sinha's novel suggests that the expected narrative can and needs to be changed. By insisting that other narratives, like Animal's, are available, Sinha contests the primacy of conventional environmental disaster accounts.

Sinha challenges forms of representation and expertise in the novel, and through Animal, he creates a narrator that complicates what it means to be a victim on moral, temporal, and spatial scales. In his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* [2011], Nixon explains how victims of the Chernobyl disaster expressed their experiences: "A key survival strategy was to fit their life stories, their self-narrations, into the limited genetic narratives of suffering that possessed a state mandate from which a small stream of compensation might flow" (50). Out of economic necessity, survivors of Chernobyl strategically tailored their narratives to coincide with medical and legal expectations of what constituted a victim of the disaster. Nixon's analysis and Sinha's novel demonstrate how disaster sufferers craft their self-representation based on what they perceive offers the best potential legal and financial outcomes.

The highly constructed text draws attention to the desire many readers have for an immediate experience with tragedy. For those who do not live with the daily effects of disaster,

there can be a perverse desire to marvel at it through the lives and stories of Others. Sinha challenges the reader's ability to fully identify with the experiences through rhetorical devices that constantly remind the reader that immediacy is an illusion. Sinha interrupts the narrative with ellipses or words that must be looked up at the end of the text. The glossary of Hindi to English translations suggests that the primary audience for the novel is Western Anglophone. How bilingualism functions in the text will be examined more thoroughly later in the chapter, but it is worth noting here that the glossary Sinha includes forces the reader into a bilingual exercise where she must look up words she does not understand if she cannot read Hindi. Animal reminds the reader that the words written on the page can never fully capture his material experience, and once the story has been told, he cannot control what images or emotions his narrative creates for readers. He says: "For you they're just words written on a page. Never can you hear my voice, nor can I ever know what pictures you see" (21).

Sinha draws attention to alternative perspectives, which compete for the most effective and profitable ways of representing the effects of disaster. Those who suffer environmental burdens negotiate a complex generic game between recounting immediate experience and constructing a narrative most likely to fit the expectations required for aid and recognition. Sinha's novel is concerned with identity and recognition—who gets recognized as worthy of human rights. The burden of proof often falls on the victim to provide somatic and bureaucratic evidence that one is a sufferer. Nixon notes that Sinha's novel provides an individual life rather than anonymous, collective accounts that verge on statistical (66). This strategy enables readers to fathom helping one person as opposed to the daunting prospect of hundreds, thousands, or even millions. The fictionalized immediacy implicates the readers in the story and attempts to make them personally responsible for the knowledge they now possess. Sinha constructs a

narrative that extends its reader's circle of concern to include recognition of the Other's intrinsic value as a living being.

The ironic tone of the novel reveals the limitations of certain environmental justice frames. Humor and irony are keys to Sinha's ability to make the story of Khaufpur palatable to an English-speaking audience that may have the best intentions but continues to be complicit in environmentally destructive behavior. The counter-narrative that Sinha constructs establishes an ironic stance toward the disaster. *Animal* highlights the contradictions inherent in a world where a situation like the Kampani-Union Carbide chemical explosion is possible. This ironic sensibility in the novel and on the world and environmental problems in general makes for a promising fit with the priorities of environmental justice movements. According to Bronislaw Szerszynski in "The Post-Ecologist Condition: Irony as Symptom and Cure," irony consists of two levels of meaning where some contradiction or incongruity occurs between the two levels. Traditionally, an element of "innocence" exists in a victim of irony who is unaware of the other level of meaning (Szerszynski 341). *Animal* functions as an observer of irony who narrates the incongruities that Elli, the frequent victim of irony because of her unfamiliarity with local customs, does not comprehend. But Elli is not the only victim of irony.

Sinha produces irony as "world relation" in the novel, which is a general irony that implicates everyone; it catches the observer of irony as well as the victim in its grasp (Szerszynski 348). This type of "ironic sensibility can help identify and draw attention to the 'occult incompatibilities' in the contemporary world—tensions, inconsistencies and absurdities which are rendered invisible by the dominant symbolic codes through which contemporary society is reproduced" (Szerszynski 342-343). Sinha's novel suggests that embracing a world of contradiction and misunderstanding "can become a fit dwelling place for ethical responsibility"

(Szerszynski 350). In *Animal's People*, Sinha creates an ironic environmentalism: “one which rejected the hope of a harmonization of human affairs through a harmonization with nature, but instead understood the human condition as intrinsically paradoxical and aporetic, [...] a rather different sort of environmentalism than that offered by most accounts of environmental politics” (Szerszynski 350-351). An examination of how Sinha positions Elli in relation to an ironic sensibility demonstrates the contradictions and misunderstandings that are a part of the human condition. Instead of bemoaning the possibility of failure, an ironic approach to the world welcomes this inevitability while at the same time insisting on the need to act despite the possibility for error.²⁷

In the novel, Elli's medical clinic functions as a place where Sinha contests dominant perspectives on expertise, and the boycott of her clinic by the people of Khaufpur represents a site where an ironic sensibility surfaces between local knowledge and scientific authority. Sinha includes multiple perspectives on scientific expertise in the novel, and he suggests that dialogue and recognizing where different sides locate the problem can be a way to approach this issue. The people in Khaufpur are among the poorest in the world and have very little political clout. Experience has taught them that “official” measures can be used to oppress them further. For some citizens, Elli's sudden appearance in the city and her unknown background and motives elicit the possibility that she is working for the chemical company to collect medical information in order to further delay or refute their claims for compensation. The local inhabitants do not distrust medical expertise in general, but rather are wary of an outsider who they know little

²⁷ This chapter focuses on Elli's character, but it is important to mention that *Animal* functions not only as an observer of irony, but irony is directed toward him in the novel too. Sinha represents contradictions within *Animal*, and it can be argued that *Animal*'s acerbic personality masks an innocence about the world that he constantly fears will be exposed. The absurdity of his misunderstandings about other characters suggests that Sinha crafts *Animal*'s emotional volatility to remind the reader that even his narrative cannot be taken fully at face value. I am grateful to Lawrence Buell for this insight.

about and who may use their medical records against them. Elli's does not recognize yet that her position in Khaufpur may be associated with certain biases. One criticism of scientific discourse has been its perceived objectivity, and many scholars point out that scientific perspectives are situated like any other discourse. The Khaufpuris associate Elli's American-ness with the United States-based Kampani. From Elli's point of view, she has left her life in the United States to provide aid for the people of Khaufpur, and she cannot understand why they would be reluctant to take advantage of her services. At issue here is Elli's representation of herself; she cannot yet imagine what those outside of herself may perceive her to be. Sinha's novel suggests that recognizing why we represent ourselves the way we do is crucial to understanding how others might perceive us differently than our self-construction. Therefore, a lack of information and dialogue contribute to the conflict surrounding Elli's clinic. Neither side knows the reasons behind the other side's actions. This lack of information leads to misunderstanding, anger, and misguided solutions.

Sinha diffuses the tension through irony, which awakens both sides, but particularly Elli, to the way the other character understands the situation. Two scenes illustrate the folly of their initial reluctance to engage in civil dialogue about the conflict. The music wars literally and symbolically represent an inability to hear. They occur whenever Elli plays her piano then Somraj plays his music, and vice versa.²⁸ Elli and Somraj drown one another out and each side believes the other is to blame. Animal observes, "So, both sides of the road it's the same complaint" (168). Sinha's use of irony and absurdity to push the positions on the clinic toward resolution suggests that humor has a role to play in serious, environmental situations. The second scene, the petition and picketing against Somraj in front of his house, dramatizes the physical

²⁸ Somraj is a former singer and Nisha's father. His home serves as the meeting place for Nisha, Animal, Zafar, and the community group of activists who are organized against the Kampani.

and communicative gap between the two perspectives in order to exaggerate and poke fun at the discrepancy. The reconciliation of the two sides happens when Somraj joins in the march against himself: “Thus is the crowd treated to the amazing sight of Somraj picketing his own house, calling upon himself to stop being unfair” (192). Sinha undermines Elli’s intention for the protest through the actions of Somraj, which exposes “a less moralistic and self-satisfied political style, one which acknowledges that no one can know political truths perfectly or live blamelessly, especially under current circumstances” (Szerszynski 352). The misunderstanding on both sides is resolved once they speak to one another and learn the reasons behind the other’s actions.

Sinha’s use of irony suggests that more than dialogue is necessary to resolve this situation; through the absurd war of instruments and picket line, Sinha proposes that each side must not only recognize the other’s position, but it also must recognize the flaws within its own perspective. In order for the United States to be a global hope, self-reflective examination of American values and actions is necessary. Elli confronts the errors she committed in the eyes of the people of Khaufpur when she dealt with Zahreel Khan, a government minister, to set up the clinic, and Somraj acknowledges the inadequacy of the local activist group’s approach to finding out information about Elli. The interaction between Elli and Somraj suggests that no single perspective—scientific expertise or local knowledge—has the sole solution. Recognition of the inadequacy for any one position to provide the answer to environmental problems lies at the heart of Sinha’s novel.

The resolution of the clinic boycott signals the beginning of Elli’s personal transformation as she moves beyond her solipsistic representation of herself and understands the Khaufpuris’ perspectives. This increased understanding enables her to accomplish what she came to Khaufpur to do: provide medical aid to the people affected by the explosion and its enduring

consequences. Animal's humor and the comic absurdity in Somraj's boycott of himself contribute to Elli's transformation. She learns from Animal and by the end of the novel, she uses humor and irony to teach a lesson to the corporation. Animal is the cheekiest character in the novel, and he possesses a keen awareness of the contradictions in human nature. He dwells in the incongruity between inward intention and outward behavior.

Because of his irreverent voice and a physical and mental status that challenge what it means to be human, most scholars focus on Animal's character in relation to the questions the novel raises about the boundaries between the human and nonhuman. Pablo Mukherjee frames the human/nonhuman debate in the novel in terms of recognition and spatial politics: what does one call those who "by dint of their underprivileged location in the hierarchy of 'the new world order', cannot access the minimum of the rights and privileges that are said to define 'humanity'?" (*Postcolonial Environments* 144-145). Additionally, "who decides to build or dump what where and how these decisions affect a disproportionate number of human and nonhuman beings who have little say in the matter?" ("Tomorrow There Will Be More" 216). Nixon adds a geographical and temporal element to the injustices suffered by the people of Khaufpur: "*Animal's People* stages a simultaneous inquiry into the border zones between human and animal and the economic boundaries between rich and poor....What does it mean, the novel asks, to belong to the same species—in biological, existential, ethical, and economic terms?" (450). Mukherjee's and Nixon's claims clarify how Animal's physical presence raises questions about human rights and who deserves and receives equal consideration. Additionally, their arguments highlight issues of distributive and procedural justice and justice as recognition.

Elli sheds additional light on the issues raised by Mukherjee and Nixon. In the United States, the unequal distribution of environmental burdens can often be attributed to racist

practices, but Elli encounters a different type of oppression in India—injustice based on economic, national, and racial status. Nixon suggests the current situation in Bhopal-Khaufpur stems from economic inequality, but the reason the chemical factory located in that city and shirked safety regulations in the first place stems from environmental racist ideas that certain people are more accustomed to or more appropriate for unhealthy and toxic places. Mukherjee explains the logic behind siting potentially toxic businesses in less desirable places: “What is human in one, is not so in the other. What is understood as environment in one, is incomprehensible in the other” (*Postcolonial Environments* 142). Mukherjee underscores why Sinha represents Elli as having difficulty understanding the values, living standards, and expectations of the local population. The conceptual importance of how cultures and nations recognize who counts as worthy of consideration affects how the situation is perceived and therefore what solutions will be proposed. In the novel, economic status crosses religious, caste, gender, and ethnic lines. Although Elli is aware of the economic conditions of the Khaufpuris, she cannot fully grasp the level of destitution in parts of the city. Because of this unfamiliarity, she emphasizes nationality as the root of the disadvantages the people face. Her American perspective and “international whiteness” programs her to view the situation in these terms, and this approach aligns with a traditional American environmental justice frame.²⁹ But Sinha’s novel challenges the role of national identity in environmental situations by adding consideration of global economics and politics to the circumstances in Bhopal-Khaufpur. In addition to racial differences, in Sinha’s novel political and economic systems that cross national boundaries contribute to injustices.

²⁹ International whiteness refers to the racial privilege experienced by whites on a global scale when considered through international circuits of power. See Rob Nixon and Michael Eric Dyson for further reading on this dynamic.

The scale of poverty and environmental injustices is more pronounced in the Global South.³⁰ The economic disparity between developed and under-developed nations leads some governments in developing countries to accept businesses that do not adhere to minimum safety and environmental regulations in return for economic progress. Governments might agree to World Bank conditions that disadvantage certain segments of the population in exchange for international favor. Corporations often choose these locations because the people who live there are considered disposable. The economic logic that drives corporations and governments to put a monetary value on human lives illustrates the complex system that local movements are up against. Sinha's novel suggests that nationality explains one factor for determining access to safe and healthy places to live, and by extension, monetary value. In other words, individual lives are worth less in densely populated, "third world" countries.³¹

The novel reveals the irony of a situation where an American entity causes the problems, but the United States also represents potential hope for remedies. Sinha illustrates the disparity between nations of the Global North and South and the contradiction between the importance of nationality for human rights purposes and the reality of a global economy that largely transgresses national boundaries. The Kampani has abandoned the factory and refuses to return and to be held accountable for clean-up of the toxins. The amorphous position transnational corporations occupy affords them many of the advantages of operating in a particular nation-state but often prevents them from incurring penalties that are enforced on national levels. Mukherjee explains the legal posturing Union Carbide used to avoid trial: "Union Carbide first argued that as an American multinational it could neither be charged nor tried in India, and then,

³⁰ An easy "first/third world" divide is complicated by pockets of extreme wealth that exist in countries of the Global South and the presence of poverty in many areas of the Global North.

³¹ This is not to suggest that instances of environmental injustice do not occur in "first world" countries. The situation before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans proves otherwise. However, corporations are less likely to ignore minimum safety standards in the United States than in Ogoniland, Nigeria, for example.

memorably, that American courts and juries could not try it because they would not be able to comprehend the reality of daily life in India” (*Postcolonial Environments* 142). The global economy operates across borders while legal avenues available often remain confined within the boundaries of a nation. Transnational corporations flaunt those limits, and the novel reveals the scalar deficiencies of an American environmental justice frame, which assumes responsibility and burdens stay confined within a national context. In the novel, Animal’s body becomes ironic: he lives bounded by the borders of a nation and a body, while another nation’s corporation transcends those boundaries to permeate him with literal and figurative toxins. Sinha’s novel illustrates the inadequacy of a national frame when considering environmental issues, particularly disasters produced by multi-national corporations.

In an era of globalization and increased resource extraction, Andrew Dobson’s concept of ecological citizenship “that might extend the rights and privileges attached to a wealthy nation to the people living in its offshore resource colonies” (Lemenager and Foote 574) becomes an intriguing proposal. Would Union Carbide evade safety standards and clean-up responsibilities if the people of Khaufpur-Bhopal were honorary United States citizens? Maybe, but the legal recourse for action would be more transparent. This relates to Elli’s insistence that Animal’s spine would have been fixed if he had grown up in America. Her solution to his individual circumstance gestures toward the need to consider what Robyn Eckersley, in *The Green State*, asserts as a main principle for “ecological democracy”: “all those potentially affected by a risk should have some meaningful opportunity to participate or otherwise be represented in the making of the policies or decisions that generate the risk” (111). This would expand the spatial and temporal scales in which rights are extended, and would reverse the burden of proof from victims to perpetrators of risk (Eckersley 114). In addition to challenging space-specific notions

of democracy based on the borders of the nation-state and to extending the same benefits afforded to corporations and the global market to the local inhabitants who shoulder the burdens, Eckersley's formulation of ecological democracy includes nonhuman actors in the representative process by proceeding "*as if* all those affected were present, well informed, and capable of raising objections" (111 italics original). It is unclear whether Sinha's novel endorses some form of environmental citizenship like the ones described by Dobson and Eckersley, but the text does illustrate the difference between how Elli perceives the rights and privileges available to those born in America compared to the lack of benefits accessible to those who suffer from toxic effects perpetuated by American entities outside the borders of the United States.

The scalar problems of an American environmental justice frame are pointed out by Dobson and Eckersley and are represented in Sinha's novel. The issue of totalizing discourse and particularist representation concerns specific representations of environmental situations compared to an abstract politics that would bring together diverse local movements into a global coalition. Scholars and activists recognize that one of the greatest advantages environmental justice movements possess is a local focus that enables attention to specific community needs and desires. Harvey refers to this as "militant particularism," and while acknowledging the benefit of local approaches, he has argued that in order for these movements to gain wider traction, they need to link their struggles with others, move from particular interests to general interests, and develop a more transcendent and universal politics (400). Harvey's use of "transcendent" and "universal" suggests a need to move beyond the particular focus that has been so crucial to the effectiveness of environmental justice movements. The acknowledgement that interactions at multiple scales contribute to injustices seems absolutely necessary, but the prioritization of the universal in Harvey's recommendation can be challenged. While the diverse

cast of characters in Sinha's novel suggests that thinking about "that night" as solely a local problem ignores the range of geographic, political, and economic links that contribute to this type of disaster, the novel emphasizes the importance of local grassroots efforts.³²

Elli functions as an intermediary figure that can negotiate particular and more general interests, but she does not impose strategies, rather, she learns from the local activists and intervenes where she can. Although she represents an international aid worker with a general interest in fighting for justice, her role in the novel is not depicted as superlative to the local efforts. The ramifications of the explosion are felt most acutely at the local level, and the novel acknowledges that any hope for rectifying the problem and for preventing future injustices will involve solutions that extend beyond the immediate location. While Sinha's text suggests that a connection to larger networks of activists and human rights regimes may be necessary for the large-scale transformation needed, it represents the local movement as the leaders and the international activists as the ones who should adjust to particular local circumstances.

The premise for Sinha's novel stems from a particular historical situation that occurred in Bhopal, India, but his fictional re-creation of the events aligns the text with general interests. Elli's connection to larger networks of activists is less obvious than Piya's in *The Hungry Tide*, but Elli's position as an American doctor living in Khaufpur because she believes in justice for the local people makes her an intermediary between the particular situation in India and global coalitions. Elli's personal transformation throughout the narrative can be linked to the form of the novel. The tape recordings and the Australian journalist that Sinha uses as the basis for the distribution of Animal's story indicate that the intended audience is the international community. If Elli functions as a symbol of that community in the novel, then her evolution represents the

³² Scholars point out that thinking in terms of local versus global misses a large range of the coalitions that are currently being formed to fight injustices on regional, trans-regional, and other scales.

potential change Animal's narrative can incite once published. Sinha emphasizes that this change would reflect more than justice for Khaufpuris but would include awareness and action for the other Bhopals in the world. Similar disasters occur around the globe, and by highlighting the slow violent effects of the factory blast and its aftermath, Sinha challenges what constitutes an environmental disaster and represents the Union Carbide explosion as more than an isolated situation. By representing an event that occurred more than twenty years prior, Sinha reminds readers that the timeliness of the situation, like the toxins, has not eroded.³³ This type of disaster persists in wreaking havoc on the people who live with the effects of the poisons.

A connection to other struggles represents a global dimension in Sinha's novel. Zafar leads the local fight against the Kampani-Union Carbide. Sinha crafts him as an idealized figure: self-sacrificing, humble, and charismatic. Zafar deflects much of the praise showered on him and insists there are people like him leading struggles all over the world: "Is Khaufpur the only poisoned city? It is not. There are others and each one has its own Zafar. There'll be a Zafar in Mexico City and others in Hanoi and Manila and Halabja and there are Zafars of Minamata and Seveso, of São Paulo and Toulouse" (296). Zafar displays awareness of movements against injustice around the world, but would the Khaufpuris benefit from an abstract politics that attempts to unify their reasons for struggle and strategies with other localized campaigns? A tactic utilized by Zafar and other members of the local movement includes a hunger strike that infuses the novel with dramatic urgency. While countless deaths can be attributed to the chemical explosion "that night," the prospect of a charismatic leader dying from hunger while protesting outside the court building twenty years later adds a spectacular element that troubles

³³ The *Bhopali* documentary film, directed by Van Maximilian Carlson and released in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the explosion, details the on-going toxic ramifications in Bhopal. Poisoned ground water, toxic earth, and birth defects to second and third generation descendants continue to disrupt the area's habitat and the lives of the residents.

the Indian government and the corporation lawyers. Sinha represents the hunger strike as a local strategy, but it conjures up images of other activists and movements that have employed similar tactics in their fights against injustice.³⁴

Elli describes the effects of the hunger strike on Zafar's and Farouq's bodies:

She tells them what she knows about hunger strikes, the slow wasting of the body. 'In Ireland prisoners lasted sixty days on water before they died, but blindness plus other irreversible damage occurred long before that point. Fasts by Turkish prisoners confirm these grim statistics. These were with water. There's hardly any data on fasting without water, but in this extreme heat, the body will dry out and begin its collapse within two or three days.' Again and again Elli tries to make the four see how suicidal is their decision. 'You're now in the same situation as people who get lost in a desert without food or water, except that you've put yourself there, you are making your own desert.' (291-292)

Elli connects the actions by Zafar and the three other fasters with struggles around the world. The effects of a lack of food and water on the human body underscore the material commonality among diverse groups of people fighting for justice. Elli comprehends the fast without water in medical terms; she does not yet understand the reason behind Zafar's and the other activists' decision. In a situation where legal recourse has proven unsuccessful and the national government is in cooperation with the foreign corporation, the tactics available to local movements to inject a decades-long fight with drama and high-profile visibility are strategically planned. The hunger strike receives a locally unique element—fasting without water. In the summer heat of India, this additional aspect increases the suffering for the fasters but also

³⁴ Guha mentions the strategies available to local communities: "Their techniques of resistance have often used traditional networks of organization—the village and the tribe; and traditional forms of protest—the *dharna* or sit-down strike, and the *bhook hartal* or hunger fast" (57)

elevates the risks for all sides: the lawyers, corporation, government, and court must face the ramifications of a charismatic leader martyring himself. These “weapons of the weak” allow local activists to resist the powerful forces against them while maximizing popular and political support.³⁵ Sinha’s representation of the hunger fast combines a globally-recognized tactic with a specific local feature to heighten the stakes.

Other scholars address the common appeals Sinha’s novel includes. Mukherjee argues that Sinha represents north Indian classical music in the text as a universal language to cross communal, religious, linguistic, and class-cultural divides (*Postcolonial Environments* 158). Although Mukherjee does not address whether music would function as a universal language for a hearing-impaired person, his proposal of Indian classical music as a universal language in the novel maintains a specificity similar to the fast without water while simultaneously appealing to shared understanding. In addition to Indian classical music and the hunger-strike tactic in the novel, Sinha positions bilingualism as a general asset that facilitates dialogue and could connect diverse activists.

In the traditional sense, bilingualism refers to the ability to speak at least two languages, such as English and Hindi, but for this analysis it can also mean the capacity to speak and understand different contextual literacies. A bilingual character may speak French and Hindi, or she may be able to negotiate legal terminology and street verse. In the novel, bilingualism is a metaphorical representation of the importance of dialogue across national, class, racial, religious, educational, and other boundaries. It functions as currency and commodity. Bilingualism is integral for the characters to navigate the world Sinha creates. Facility with language is crucial to Animal’s character, and his ability to speak and understand multiple languages, even before he is literate in any written language, complicates the boundaries between human and animal. There

³⁵ See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.

are numerous references to Animal's ability to understand spoken language—French, English, Hindi—and in addition to Animal, Ma Franci, Zafar, and Elli all possess the currency of bilingualism. Those four characters represent the most prominent activists in the novel, and their bilingualism allows them to access different places and people that would be unavailable otherwise. While all of the characters mentioned possess multiple levels of bilingualism, none of them can converse effectively across all contexts. As a result, understanding and misunderstanding surface in the text in productive, prohibitive, and ironic ways.

Bilingualism reflects more than the realities of many environmental activists; it confers power and access to a global coalition of movements engaged in similar struggles. While Sinha's own abilities in English, Hindi, and French influence the languages his characters will possess, the relevance of those languages in the novel goes beyond his personal proclivity. The local characters in the novel speak Hindi and so do Elli and Ma Franci.³⁶ This makes sense for an Indian-based novel. Sinha's glossary suggests that the current market and global system will require bilingualism if justice ever is to materialize. The novel proposes that in order to participate in the global economy *and* be morally just global citizens, one will need to be proficient in more than one language.

Sinha includes characters that do and do not have the capacity to engage with the world on a bilingual level. The corporation lawyers do not have bilingual abilities, which leads to

³⁶ While the focus of this chapter is on Elli, it would be negligent to discuss the idea of bilingualism without a closer examination of Ma Franci. If Sinha proposes bilingualism as necessary for environmental justice to materialize, then Ma Franci's transformation at the end of the novel serves as an excellent example of this proposal. Ma Franci arrives in Khaufpur as a nun to help the poor and destitute. She speaks fluent Hindi, but after the factory explosion, she loses the ability to speak or understand Hindi and returns to conversing only in her native tongue, French. She cannot even recognize Hindi as a language and thinks people are babbling incoherently when they speak that language. Her loss of Hindi symbolizes the way the people of Khaufpur have been severed from the democratic promises of the Western world because of the explosion, but more importantly the return of her Hindi (the time and place) represents the crucial role of bilingualism in the novel and in environmental justice as a whole. One of the heroes at the end of the novel, Ma Franci sacrifices herself but directs other Khaufpuris to safety in perfect Hindi after the factory is set on fire again.

misunderstanding and misguided, short-term solutions. An exchange between a lawyer and an old woman, Gargi, illustrates Sinha's perspective on the consequences for victims when perpetrators do not possess bilingualism. Outside the courtroom, Gargi approaches the lawyer, "if the Kampani has any honour it must stand trial, and it should pay just and proper compensation for all the wrongs it has done" (306). The lawyer asks what she is saying and a journalist simplifies her statement: he says that she is asking for money. Animal narrates the lawyer's response: he "reaches in his red-lined coat, gets out his wallet. 'Buy yourself something nice,' he says. Old Gargi's standing there with five hundred rupees in her hand" (307). Is 500 rupees the price of human health, dignity, and life? The interaction highlights the chasm between Gargi's perspective on solutions to the situation and the lawyer's understanding of what has happened. Gargi views the disaster and its effects in moral, legal, and economic terms; the lawyer views them from individual economic standpoints only. Irony permeates the lawyer's command to "buy something nice." In a city where Animal survives on four rupees a day, 500 rupees represents a significant sum, but the casual charity illustrates how the lawyer is completely out-of-touch with the reality of the city and its residents.

In addition to lacking the ability to converse in another language, the corporation lawyer is represented as culturally deficient too; his solution to the problem comes from an individualistic point of view where money is given to one person as opposed to providing money for the development of a community center to help sufferers, for improving water sources and land permeated by toxins, or for proposing systemic changes to the way benefits and burdens are distributed. The misinterpretation of what the victims are asking for represents the gap between corporate attitudes toward environmental disasters and the needs of local communities. Sinha represents the Kampani's elision of responsibility, denial of culpability, and willful ignorance of

the on-going toxic effects of the explosion that continue to pollute water, land, and bodies to show the consequences of corporations being in control.

The lawyers cannot engage in dialogue with the residents of Khaufpur, which occludes the possibility for productive compromise. Sinha contrasts the lawyers' approach with another appeal to common ideals—a shared sense of humanity—and shows that Elli's bilingualism is key to her transformation. Elli's fluency in Hindi allows her access to the Kingdom of the Poor, the slum where Animal lives. Animal takes her there so she can hear the problems of the people most affected by the explosion. Although Elli can understand what the people say because she knows Hindi, she admits that she cannot fully understand the suffering they have endured. This inability to know the Other shifts the way Elli comprehends the situation. She realizes she cannot fully empathize with their experiences but refuses to acknowledge that this means they have nothing in common: "There's simple humanity? Isn't there?" (Sinha 186). Elli's appeal demonstrates the different expectations characters have in the novel. Animal responds to her plea, "No good asking me...I long ago gave up trying to be human" (186). Animal's statement reveals a different perspective on abstract concepts like justice and humanity. For Elli, the concepts mean something because she has experienced both in her life. But Animal and the people of Khaufpur have seen little evidence of justice or humanity by the Indian government and the Kampani. Animal admits to the readers that he's lying when making the statement to Elli. He still wants to believe in humanity even though many experiences have taught him he should not. Animal's "rejection" of trying to be human reminds the reader of the need to decenter Elli's perspective on the situation. The hope Animal maintains for humanity and justice reinforces the idea that potential remedies will need to include collective solutions rather than ones aimed solely at individuals.

Elli's conversation with Animal about a shared, "simple humanity," raises questions about what a human-centered perspective means. The issue of human rights surfaces most significantly in the human/nonhuman boundary that Animal's character blurs. While Animal provides the most insight into how Sinha's novel is positioned in relation to ecocentric and anthropocentric viewpoints, Elli's growth in understanding the people of Khaufpur sheds additional light on these perspectives. Some could argue that Sinha's construction of Animal's character challenges an anthropocentric viewpoint. Instead, Sinha's novel helps to redefine an anthropocentric perspective in productive ways that do not neglect other species but ultimately foreground human concerns. Elli understands compassion and fairness as a system of reciprocity: "You [Animal] said our friendship was not equal, well I am giving you something, you can give me something, each of us gives freely, not because we have to, but because we want to. This makes us equal" (176). Humans have the unique ability to prioritize another species or other humans based on the desire to do so. This desire can stem from a moral capacity to put others' needs ahead of our own self-interest. Animal responds to Elli's proposal that "this equality leaves me broke" (176). Through Elli, Sinha challenges the idea that economic self-interest should determine the terms for all environmental debates. While Elli's privileged economic status allows her to disregard monetary exchange for her services without compromising her survival, by reframing the discourse of the discussion, Sinha proposes moral duty as a powerful, and necessary, motivation that can change the priorities of an anthropocentric view. Greed and self-interest need not define a human-centered world view; humans can decide to prioritize others.

Sinha uses the end of the novel to emphasize the moral components of humans' decisions. He shifts the narrative from a battle between the forces of good and evil—the people

of Khaufpur versus the Kampani—to a conflict within the “faithful” himself. Animal reflects on his own behavior and moral obligation toward the people in his life. His retreat outside of the city at the end of the novel mocks some mainstream, ecocentric views. Sinha illustrates the differences between humans and animals in the way they view survival. The nonhumans that Animal converses with focus on basic physical needs, while Animal is motivated by community, friendship, hope, and love. By having nonhumans speak with Animal, Sinha feigns to “think like a mountain.” Any attempt at dialogue with different perspectives—such as those from the mind of a lizard—can be productive for a broader understanding of complex situations. The novel suggests that sometimes what is in the best interest for humans is to prioritize other species’ concerns. Humans have been represented as both *a part of* and *apart* from nature. They possess the ability to consider the moral aspects of a situation, and the ability to imagine things differently from what they *are* and instead to imagine what they *ought* to be remains one of the greatest tools available to environmental justice movements.

Nature and culture are not separated in Sinha’s vision, and the end of his novel disrupts the idea that solutions will be found through an escape to utopic nature. Animal realizes he must return to the City of Sorrows and deal with problems in the here and now. Images of an environmental utopia are unsustainable. What is sustainable, according to Sinha, is a coalition of diverse people coming together based on friendship and love for one another and for their community. The novel raises questions about what courses of action can lead to healthier environments for humans and nonhumans across the globe. Are individual acts sufficient or must larger systems and ideologies, like capitalism and the belief in limitless growth, change? Sinha suggests that a change in attitudes on the individual and local level will be needed if broader social change ever is to materialize. The novel concludes in traditional comedy form—a wedding

between Elli and Somraj. The metaphorical joining of American and Indian, East and West, First and Third World illustrates how changing individual perspectives could potentially lead to larger societal transformation.

Elli, among other characters, evolves in the novel through careful observation and a willingness to hear what others are saying. She develops a better understanding of the people of Khaufpur, and her growth as a character is best exemplified by her anonymous, heroic act that disrupts the plans of the corporation lawyers and Indian government officials. Elli's act of corrective irony near the end of the novel achieves poetic justice for the community. Corrective irony entails dramatizing the incongruities of certain behavior (Szerszynski 345). In order to disrupt the meeting between the Kampani and the Indian government scheduled to undermine the local movement's temporary victory, Elli dons a black burqa and disguises herself as a poor cleaning woman. She empties a bottle of stink bomb juice into the air conditioner, which mimics some of the burning sensations caused by the company's chemicals. Elli's increased cultural knowledge is crucial to the success of her act. Szerszynski acknowledges the value of corrective irony tactics but warns a danger exists if an observer cannot clearly perceive the difference between the two levels of meaning. The most important aspect of Elli's action is that the press has been notified something is going to occur, and journalists are there to witness the lawyers' and officials' reactions:

Once the secret was out, the deal was dead. The Kampani was saying that it was the victim of terrorism...but the jarnaliss [journalists] took a different view. They said that one stink bomb, however disgusting, could not compare to the terror the Kampani had brought on the people of Khaufpur, plus how could the Kampani

bosses demand that anyone should be prosecuted while they were themselves refusing to appear before the Khaufpur court? (361)

Although it is never stated explicitly, the reader can justifiably assume that Elli alerted the press about the meeting. This fits into the concept of bilingualism and the ability to understand different literacies—Elli recognizes the importance of media in environmental justice fights and of tailoring her ironic act so that the meaning is clearly understood. While Gargi's serious appeals to the lawyer were misrepresented by the translating journalist, Sinha indicates that all the journalists present for Elli's sabotage understand exactly what message she means to send. Her action highlights the incongruities in the lawyers' reaction and suggests that humor and irony can be effective tools for environmental justice movements. Elli's act reflects her greater understanding of how things work in Khaufpur and what is needed to accomplish minor goals in the fight for justice.

Poetic justice and real justice are not the same things. But if poetic justice is the only form available to a group, is it better than nothing? In literary terms, poetic justice involves punishing vice, rewarding virtue, and the triumph of logic. The lawyers' vice is their lack of understanding and empathy. They have lost sight of a common humanity. Elli's stink bomb forces those representatives to symbolically experience something akin to the terror of "that night." The corporal effects of the innocuous stink bomb remind readers of similar bodily reactions from the hunger strike. On a visceral level, the lawyers must recognize their connection to the people of Khaufpur. They gain awareness of the consequences that their actions caused for thousands of people. Nixon argues that awareness is part of the novel's effect:

how some afflicted communities are afforded more visibility—and more access to remediation—than others through the mechanisms of globalization,

environmental racism, and class discrimination. This discriminatory distribution of environmental visibility—intranationally and transnationally—lies at the heart of Sinha's fictional endeavor. (64-65)

The awareness Sinha brings to the Bhopal disaster through his fictional account challenges the expected narrative about the lives of disaster victims. Through Animal's refusal to tell the story others want, Sinha engages the uniquely human power to change the narrative trajectory of how things are in order to imagine the world differently. The hope at the end of the novel arises from the possibility to imagine a different ending. Animal says, "I will tell this story, I thought, and that way I'll find out what the end should be" (365). Sinha's "writerly," self-reflexive text challenges the reader to make the meaning as she reads. He does not prescribe solutions or offer a concrete resolution to the problems in Khaufpur-Bhopal, but his novel negotiates the issues and incongruities inherent in environmental justice situations and proposes new ways of thinking through the problems. The text is positioned in relation to differences between a traditional American environmental justice frame and global perspectives, and the reader is encouraged to consider alternative approaches to standard attitudes about environmental disasters. Sinha provides Elli as a synecdoche for the transformation needed in American consciousness.

Poverty and poisoned people remain in Bhopal, but fiction can play a role in potential solutions. Sinha's novel represents humans as a part of nature but different from other species—they have the power to make moral decisions and change the narrative of what should be prioritized. The reality of globalization means sharing reasons with one another becomes even more significant. According to Sinha, knowledge about environmental justice issues must move beyond the physical and technological to include cultural understanding.

The development of cultural understanding lies at the heart of the next novel examined, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh represents a similar transformative process for his American protagonist, Piya, as she negotiates the rivers and people of the Sundarbans region of India and Bengal.

Re-Imagining Places and People in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

In India we are fortunate in that our literary traditions, powerfully influenced though they are by the West, have never wholly succumbed to the romantic imagining of Nature as a 'pristine', uninhabited temple. Such writers as Sivarama Karanth, Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi have always been profoundly aware of the predicament of those who live in India's forests. That a meaningful debate on this issue is possible at all in today's India is due in no small part to their fictional explorations of this territory

--Amitav Ghosh, "Wild Fictions"

Meaningful debate through fictional explorations rests at the heart of Amitav Ghosh's, *The Hungry Tide* [2005]. Ghosh could have included himself in the list of writers who reflect profound awareness of the people who inhabit India's forests, and who write about ecologically rich areas of the country without relying on romantic representations of Nature. His novel includes multiple perspectives on human relationships with the immediate environment, nonhuman species, and other humans. The novel traces how people came to think the way they do about the issues facing the region. Ghosh's negotiation of various perspectives in the novel suggests that he does not want to prescribe one way of thinking about the area. Instead, he seems more invested in representing dialogue among multiple ideologies that challenge the reader to become more aware of the humans and nonhumans living there. The novel disrupts fixed points of view, and Ghosh uses the characters to explore potential solutions that can emerge from dialogue among multiple subjects.

An examination of *The Hungry Tide* serves as the final chapter in this project because it brings together elements discussed in the previous chapters: the roles translation and dialogue play to decenter hegemonic perspectives figure prominently in the novel, and an American protagonist transforms through the course of the text. The novel differs from the other texts in a productive way: Ghosh's position in relation to a particular environmental ethic offers the least

closure of all the writers examined. Ghosh's novel does not endorse a singular environmental sensibility. Instead, Ghosh makes readers more aware of the Sundarbans region and its complex history, mixture of languages, and social and political structures. The American character Piya's increased awareness about the people and landscape of the Sundarbans explains her transformation from mainstream environmental views to global environmental justice perspectives. Her transformation occurs after she encounters alternative perspectives, which decenter her point of view on the region and its inhabitants. By following the trajectory of Piya's change, the reader develops a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream environmentalism and an American environmental justice frame.

Summary

The novel explores the relationship between a cosmopolitan cast of characters and the shifting landscape of the rivers and islands of the Sundarbans. Piya travels to India to study a rare species of river dolphin. Born in Calcutta, she has a Bengali name, grew up in Seattle, and is a United States citizen. While on a train to the Sundarbans, Piya meets Kanai, an upper-class Indian man who owns a translation business in Kolkata. He is on his way to visit his aunt Nilima on the island of Lusibari to retrieve a diary left to him after his uncle Nirmal's death. Piya and Kanai are reunited when a local fisherman, Fokir, rescues Piya from a fall into the river and takes her to Lusibari where Kanai's aunt runs the hospital. Piya, Kanai, and Fokir fall into a complicated love triangle when Fokir helps Piya conduct a survey of the river dolphins, *Orcaella brevirostris*, and Kanai volunteers to accompany the two as a translator. Kanai reads the diary his uncle Nirmal left to him while Piya carries out the present-day river survey. Nirmal's notebook recounts the Morichjhāpi massacre that occurred twenty years prior. The alternating narrative structure of the novel—Kanai's reading of the notebook and Piya's river dolphin exploration—

creates a meditation on the complex social, environmental, and colonial history of the Sundarbans and the ramifications of governmental policies on those who call the place home.

The constructed nature of the novel highlights the many viewpoints Ghosh provides on the situation. In addition to switching between Kanai's and Piya's perspectives, Nirmal's diary appears in italics and functions as a text within a text, and Ghosh includes poetry from Rainer Maria Rilke. The diary represents an alternative history to what happened at Morichjhāpi, and the German poet's words add broader relevance to the emotions and conflicts in the narrative. Alternative histories are important in the novel, and Ghosh demonstrates how the past informs the present and vice versa. The link between the massacre on the island of Morichjhāpi and Piya, emblematic of past and present, comes through Piya's relationship with Fokir. Fokir's mother, Kusum, figures prominently in Nirmal's diary account of the events at Morichjhāpi, and Kusum's childhood friendship with Kanai provides an additional connection to the present-day narrative.

Historical Context: Morichjhāpi

The history of the Morichjhāpi massacre reaches back to Partition and involves the caste status of Hindu refugees after independence. Bangladeshi refugees from the low namasudra Hindu caste were relocated to camps in central India, far from their native landscape. The Left Front government led by the communist party, not in control at the time of Partition, saw a political opportunity and encouraged the refugees to settle in West Bengal. When the Communist government took control in 1978, the refugees took it up on its promises and migrated to the Sundarbans region. Eventually 30,000 people settled on the island of Morichjhāpi and established a community. Once in power, the Communist government reversed course and

decided the refugees were disrupting the natural habitat of Bengal tigers; the people must go. The confrontation came to a head in May 1978 when the government sent in officials and hired criminals to evict the settlers. Many people were killed and their bodies disposed of in the water so an official death count has been nearly impossible.³⁷

Ghosh represents multiple reasons for the refugees' migration to Morichjhāpi: the cultural significance of the region, the spiritual affinity to the landscape, and the economic opportunity afforded by land. Nirmal's diary causes readers to reconsider the island of Morichjhāpi, the history of its settlement, and the violent evacuation of its human inhabitants. Ghosh describes the community that develops on the island as embracing virtues of equality and harmony that Nirmal idealizes in Marxist theory. The diary functions as a counter-narrative that challenges official accounts of what happened on the island. Nirmal provides a voice to the unheard—like Kusum—and his descriptions establish a pattern of the long history of government decisions that go against similarly disadvantaged people. Ghosh does not recount the events of the actual massacre: Nirmal had already given his notebook to Horen for safekeeping before the attack on the island.

Bengal Tiger Preserves

In addition to Nirmal's diary, the novel includes other perspectives on the situation at Morichjhāpi. These competing perspectives underscore some of the differences between mainstream conservationist approaches and the concerns of environmental justice movements. Ghosh creates dialogue between the anti-hegemonic view presented in the diary and perspectives

³⁷ For additional information on the history of the Morichjhāpi massacre, please see Ross Mallick "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre"; Annu Jalais "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food'"; Nishi Pulugurtha "Refugees, Settlers, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" and Pablo Mukherjee's chapter on *The Hungry Tide* in *Postcolonial Environments*.

associated with the national government and international activist organizations. Nilima voices the government's position on why the refugees must leave: the island has been designated as a Bengal tiger reserve. Nirmal relates Kusum's disbelief that there are people who care more about the lives of tigers than the livelihood of people. The Indian government's and some Western-based environmental movements' rescripting of ecological degradation as a poor problem helps rationalize the creation of the Bengal tiger preserve. This position depends on demonizing the local inhabitants as cruel poachers and despoilers of nature whose relationship to wildlife and the landscape is one of threat and illegality, while simultaneously reverencing whites and upper class Indians as protectors of nature whose conservationist principles demonstrate a civilized superiority. It places the burden of conservation on those least economically able to shoulder it. At a time when India is trying to compete in a global, capitalistic economy, the government's decision to preserve Morichjhāpi for Bengal tigers in order to encourage ecotourism prioritizes economic development over human rights and moral obligations.

Through Ghosh's representation of Morichjhāpi, he demonstrates that improving the conditions for the people of the region coincides with the preservation of the forest and nonhuman nature. Ghosh depicts the extreme poverty and desperation that one must suffer in order to risk one's life against human-eating tigers for a bottle of honey. The settlement at Morichjhāpi suggests that when poor people have their basic needs met they are less likely to inflict large-scale damage on an ecosystem. Nirmal expresses amazement at what the settlers have achieved in such a short time: "*What had I expected? A mere jumble perhaps, untidy heaps of people piled high upon each other? That is, after all, what the word rifugi has come to mean. But what I saw was quite different from the picture in my mind's eye*" (141). Nirmal marvels that

paths have been laid, plots of land enclosed, and the bādh secured.³⁸ He observes that the settlers are not despoiling the island; their foresight and planning have resulted in orderly and comfortable living arrangements. Nirmal speaks with the head of Kusum's ward, who explains what the settlers need: “*What's most important to us at this time is to mobilize public opinion, to bring pressure on the government, to get them to leave us alone. They're putting it out that we're destroying this place; they want people to think we're gangsters who've occupied this place by force. We need to let people know what we're doing and why we're here*” (142-143). Nirmal's conversation with the ward leader and his observations of the settlement challenge the idea that refugees are living at odds with the island's environment and nonhuman inhabitants.

Nirmal's diary represents his desire to make people aware of what happened at the island, and Ghosh's example of textual dialogue between official and counter-hegemonic accounts makes people beyond the immediately affected area more aware of contemporary issues like the Sahara Project and the establishment of World Heritage sites. Ghosh's fictional depiction of the refugees twenty years ago has current relevance. He positions the Morichjhāpi massacre and the tiger reserve as implicated in systems and organizations on multiple scalar levels: local, national, and international. The land evacuated for Bengal tigers is being considered for an ecotourism project by Sahara India Pariwar.³⁹ The novel demonstrates that local villagers are not the main threat to the ecosystem; rather initiatives like the Sahara Project and Shell Bangladesh pose the greatest danger to the mangrove forests and landscape. The novel extends the discussion beyond the particular location. It places Piya and the American reader in the discussion of these issues

³⁸ The bādh refers to the embankment and serves as the “guarantor of human life on our island” (168).

³⁹ See Ghosh's essay, “Folly in the Sudarbans” for his analysis of the ecological consequences of the proposed tourist resort. Ghosh addresses the government's decision to evacuate settlers from Morichjhāpi on ecological grounds and the government's support for a tourist resort in the same region. Ghosh states: “The Sahara Parivar's project would turn large stretches of this very forest, soaked in the blood of evicted refugees, into a playground for the affluent.”

and illustrates the limits of a traditional American environmental justice frame that tends to treat issues at local and national levels only.

Transformation

The dialogue Ghosh creates among competing points of view on the Morichjhāpi massacre and the historical conditions for the local inhabitants disrupts the primacy of official accounts and relates to another example of textual dialogue that Ghosh uses: Piya encounters alternative perspectives on the humans and nonhumans who live in the region, which decenter her mainstream environmental outlook and motivate her personal transformation from a scientist interested in species preservation to someone who considers environmental justice priorities.

Piya's initial experiences of the Sundarbans are foreign because as the American character in the narrative, she has a limited, outside perspective on the place she has come to study. Ghosh creates the Sundarbans for his readers largely through Piya's eyes. The chapters told from Piya's perspective in the third-person encourage the reader to identify with her and function as the readers' fictional encounter with the land and people. Ghosh's construction of the Sundarbans increases the readers' sense of the diversity and complexity of the world:⁴⁰

It [fiction] can actually help people inhabit a place, to inhabit it in the fullness of their minds, to inhabit it with their imaginations, to see the ways in which lives link together, the lives of animals, the lives of trees, the lives of human beings. So, you know as a writer, as a novelist, there's actually not much you can do to

⁴⁰ Ghosh's construction of the Sundarbans in the novel parallels geographer Robert Sack's ideas about the creation of better places.

change the world but to have made a place imaginatively available I think that's perhaps the best thing that I could do.⁴¹

Ghosh celebrates the impact a novel can have for a place, and he attests to the important role fiction can play in social and environmental discussions. His novel makes a previously unknown and unconsidered place (for many of his readers) imaginatively available and in doing so, it reveals the limitations of Western conceptions of nature and the environment when considered alongside the landscape and inhabitants of the Sundarbans.

Ghosh uses the form of the novel to reveal the problems of not having dialogue and multiple perspectives.⁴² Ghosh divides the novel into two sections: the ebb and the flood. During the ebb section, the chapters alternate between being narrated from the third-person perspectives of Kanai and Piya, which means that Piya is unaware of the history imparted in the chapters told from Kanai's point of view. Piya's lack of knowledge about Kanai's experiences contributes to misunderstandings about the region and its inhabitants. Ghosh's rhetorical strategies implicate the reader, and she cannot claim to be ignorant of the region's rich history and social and environmental problems; she must examine herself and her potential role in the issues facing the people who live there. Ghosh encourages the reader's self-reflective examination through the way he crafts the character Piya, which allows him to guide the reader through a similar transformation as the one she experiences.

⁴¹ This quotation comes from an interview between Ghosh and Firdous Bamji at the end of the audiobook version of *The Hungry Tide*.

⁴² See U. Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments*, for his assessment of Ghosh's use of the postcolonial novel. Mukherjee argues that "*The Hungry Tide* presents us both with a particular representation of postcolonial environment and a meditation on the representative techniques appropriate for the task" (114). His argument centers on the importance of the Jatra performance of Bon Bibi in the novel and how Ghosh includes it to capture the uneven development of postcolonial environments at the level of both theme and form. According to Mukherjee, Ghosh stretches the limits of the Indian-English novel to simultaneously comment on and undercut his own position within global capitalism.

Similar to Sinha's representation of Elli Barber in *Animal's People*, Ghosh characterizes Piya as an intermediary figure between local needs and global values and interests. While Elli possesses a social justice sensibility when she arrives in Khaufpur, Ghosh crafts Piya as a character who is much farther removed from considering the justice aspects of a situation. He represents Piya as narrowly concerned only with her project and priorities at the beginning of the novel, and the alternating chapters highlight her ignorance of the complex histories, like the Morichjhāpi massacre and the Bon-Bibi myth, that affect the cultural values and interests of the diverse cast of characters. Key moments in the text show Piya's ideological transformation from initial ignorance to someone who is willing to reconsider her position as a result of her exposure to the Sundarbans. Ultimately, Piya's experiences during a cyclone near the end of the novel represent the culmination of events that cause her to self-reflect, decenter her perspective, and transform from mainstream environmental priorities to consider global environmental justice interests.

Ghosh illustrates Piya's initial ignorance about the local inhabitants through the narrative she constructs about Fokir. Piya imagines a personal history for Fokir that romanticizes his family life and background:

She pictured a hut...with mud walls and straw thatch and shutters of plaited bamboo. His father was a fisherman like him...his mother was a sturdy but tired woman....There were many children, many playmates for little Fokir....Had he seen his wife's face before the wedding? [...] A meeting between the unwed would surely not be allowed in the village Fokir lived in. (131)

Piya believes she understands Fokir and that she can identify with his life.⁴³ Ghosh encourages similar feelings of identification between the reader and Piya, but he undercuts both Piya's expectations about Fokir, and the readers' expectations about Piya. Everything Piya imagines about Fokir's life proves incorrect, which foregrounds further misunderstandings by Piya and the reader. Ghosh challenges readers' preconceived notions about the region and its inhabitants through a pivotal, and frequently-analyzed, scene from the novel: the killing of a tiger. This scene combines Piya's mainstream environmental sensibility and her fabricated impression of Fokir's character.

Piya is horrified by the torture and killing of a tiger in a village. Ghosh's graphic description of the sights, sounds, and smells that accompany the villagers' rage against the trapped animal add to the reader's discomfort during the chapter. The mob mentality that the villagers embrace alerts the reader to the dangerous nature of the situation. Piya wants to stop the villagers, and when Kanai reminds her that this would not be wise or even possible, she turns her attention to Fokir who she believes will help her. The reader has already encountered numerous situations where Piya has misinterpreted Fokir's life. Piya assumes that Fokir will react to the tiger's torture the same way she does, and she is confused when she sees that he has joined the mob to kill the animal. This scene fundamentally highlights the point that mainstream, global environmentalists can often misread local situations and needs. Ghosh does not belittle or discount Piya's reaction; he does however demonstrate that Piya has not considered why the villagers may have reacted the way they do and why Fokir does not share her view on the situation. When Kanai informs Piya about the number of humans killed by tigers each year and

⁴³ Piya and Fokir cannot speak to one another without Kanai's assistance as translator.

the daily dangers many people in the Sundarbans face, she begins to recognize that she lacks crucial knowledge about the region's inhabitants.

Ghosh represents the fundamental difficulty of changing personal ideologies and entrenched societal beliefs through Piya's resistance to Kanai's explanation of Fokir's and the villagers' treatment of the tiger. Piya is disturbed by what she has just witnessed in the village and is aghast when Kanai suggests that they too have contributed to the "horror."

Piya disassociated herself with a shake of the head. 'I don't see how I'm complicit.'

'Because it was people like you,' said Kanai, 'who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me—Indians of my class, that is—have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favor with their Western patrons. (248-249)

At this point in the novel, Piya's and Kanai's narratives have merged. They are traveling together on Horen's boat so Piya has access to the same knowledge Kanai and the reader possess; Kanai informs Piya about the loss of human life to tigers in the Sundarbans. He learns the information from Nilima before he accompanies Piya on her survey:

'My belief is that over a hundred people are killed by tigers here each year....If you put the figures together, it means that a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sundarbans—at the very least....None of the figures are reliable. But of this I'm sure: there are many more deaths than the authorities admit.' (199)

Nilima forces Kanai to realize the dangers of living day-to-day in proximity to tigers, which is often elided by government officials and people who want to benefit from the majestic appeal of the species. Kanai makes Piya confront her role in the situation, and during their conversation, Piya functions as a metonym for preservation-minded activists who have supported save the wildlife campaigns without knowing exactly what that means for the local place and inhabitants. Ghosh's novel proposes that the people who believe they are helping to alleviate suffering for animals are associated with institutions that may contribute to injustices against local residents. Through Piya's character, Ghosh draws attention to the importance of decentering certain perspectives in order to reassess international activists' positions in the web of systems and institutions that knowingly and unknowingly add to ecological and social problems worldwide.

Piya's realization that her environmental ethic differs drastically from Fokir's is an important aspect of the chapter. Ghosh also explores human-animal priorities and the issue of ecocentric and anthropocentric perspectives in the pivotal tiger-killing scene. Ghosh's concern lies with the human inhabitants of the region, which has led some critics to condemn his anthropocentrism. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin criticize Ghosh for not resolving the tiger issue by the end of the novel. They argue that the tiger becomes a "sacrificial symbol of violence itself" and functions as a scapegoat in which the local inhabitants take out their anger with both the man-eating species and those institutions and government officials who have caused the refugees untold suffering (190). The suggestion that Ghosh uses tigers as a symbol of violence and the object for taking out revenge that should be directed towards people neglects to consider how Ghosh positions tigers throughout the novel. Multiple characters display reverence for tigers: Nilima explains that the "tide country's tigers were different from those elsewhere" (199), and believers in Bon Bibi pay homage to the goddess because she protects them from the daily

danger of living near tigers. For local inhabitants, tigers play a constant role in their lives, and Ghosh does not represent this relationship as completely adversarial.

There is no doubt that the rage and passion Ghosh attributes to the villagers have roots deeper than the individual animal that has been terrorizing the island. However, Ghosh does not valorize these participants. Instead, the text questions why the people and animal are put in this position and what the causes of these actions are. Ghosh's novel highlights the hypocrisy of people and institutions that caused the depletion of species in the first place being the same ones who swoop in to save those species from the local inhabitants. Ghosh does not resolve the tiger issue in the novel because his narrative suggests that in order for the issue to be resolved, the very institutions that caused and perpetuate the problem are what need to be changed. The difficulty of this societal transformation is the point of Ghosh's engagement with the tiger issue. Ghosh's novel is not anti-conservation or anti-animal; rather it highlights the history that contributed to the need for tiger preserves, and it challenges the idea that the burden of species protection should be placed on those who did little to add to the problem and are least able to shoulder the consequences of protection policies.

When addressing animal rights in the novel, many scholars do not decry the methods utilized by colonialists even though Ghosh represents the clearing of landscapes and killing of animals by early settlers. Instead, their criticism focuses on Ghosh's depiction of more contemporary injustices against endangered species and their habitats. Nilima explains how she and the government differentiate between the two: "*But Nirmal...what Sir Daniel did happened a long time ago. Just imagine what would become of this whole area if everybody started doing the same thing today. The whole forest would disappear*" (177 italics original). Ghosh challenges readers to consider what is at the root of both conservation efforts and the local inhabitants'

desire to punish an animal. An ecocentric versus anthropocentric debate does not adequately address the problem or seem productive for either the humans or animals affected by the situation.

Instead of prescribing concrete solutions for how to decenter mainstream perspectives, Ghosh offers multiple views on environmental issues that encourage the reader to consider how she would react to similar circumstances. On the individual level, Piya's misunderstanding of the complex issues facing the region evolves into a willingness to reconsider her position after intimate involvement with the people, animals, and landscape of the area. Her personal transformation from an environmentalist concerned with endangered species and their habitats into someone who considers environmental justice perspectives when making conservation and preservation decisions culminates with her appeal to an international network for funding of a project that includes help for both the humans and animals in the region. Ghosh represents the paradox that international, mainstream conservationist projects contribute to suffering but simultaneously offer opportunities for remedy.

Piya's experience with Fokir during the cyclone signals the climactic (and climatic) moment that leads to her personal transformation. Near the end of the novel, Piya and Fokir are tracking the river dolphins but they do not spot the animals where they are usually found. Confused, they continue to track them, but get farther away from Horen's boat. A storm develops but they realize it too late to row back to safety. Instead, they stop at an island and Fokir ties them together with a sari near the top of a tree where they can ride out the cyclone and its tidal wave. Before the tidal wave, they are positioned on the tree so that the trunk protects them from the wind and flying debris. After the wave, the eye of the storm passes and the wind shifts. Ghosh describes what happens:

Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she [Piya] could feel the impact of everything hitting him [Fokir], she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (321)

The storm allows a level of intimacy with Fokir that Piya has not had before; throughout the text Ghosh represents the problem with assuming one can fully know an-Other, but with the physical fusing of their bodies, Piya comes close to experiencing what Fokir does. This moment, as well as being tied to his lifeless body while she waits out the remainder of the storm, causes Piya to go into deep, solitary contemplation, and she emerges a month after the storm with a transformed perspective on herself, her work, the region, and its inhabitants. Piya's new perspective coincides with an environmental justice view that includes human interests and takes social designations like class into consideration when thinking about species preservation and the location of animal reserves. Initially motivated to visit the region because of the promise of scientific discovery, Piya decenters her purely scientific perspective. Her fresh outlook shares similarities with an American environmental justice frame, and her class and international awareness signals its alignment with global approaches.

Piya no longer views science as the only authority on why the region matters. Skepticism towards scientific expertise is a characteristic of an American environmental justice frame, and Ghosh's novel addresses this issue. In addition to representing characters that are skeptical of expert accounts, Ghosh depicts figures that dismiss people who embrace local knowledge and myths. Scientific knowledge is a crucial component for understanding environmental issues, and Ghosh's novel illustrates that understanding local culture is crucial too. Ghosh challenges the

reader to consider the history of institutional mistreatment in the region and poses the question: how can scientific experts be trusted to help the area and its inhabitants? Ghosh suggests that stories and science must be combined in order to find viable solutions for the region. At the start of part two, “The Flood: Jowar,” Ghosh uses the first chapter, “Beginning Again,” as a microcosm for the novel as a whole. Told from the perspective of Nirmal’s diary, the chapter proposes “*that man can be transformed...he can begin again*” (149). In his diary entry, Nirmal explains that if given the chance, he would teach the children on Morichjhāpi what the region’s old myths have in common with geology. He would focus on the region’s goddesses and the deep time scale of geology. He tells a story about how the river dolphins symbolize the merging of myth and geology—the goddesses and the Indus and Ganga rivers—because nowhere else in the world are these creatures of the sea found but in the twin rivers (151). He ends with a love story: “*love flows deep in rivers*” (152). The chapter mirrors the overall trajectory of Ghosh’s novel and implies that scientific explanations only or approaches that ignore science all together cannot adequately account for the region’s deep cultural history and ecological importance.

The complex reality of environmental issues requires multiple perspectives, and Ghosh’s novel demonstrates the need for both local knowledge and official accounts about history, science, and cultural representations. The Bon Bibi myth factors prominently in the novel, and its importance centers on its ability to encompass a collective identity and mixture of languages and cultures that create a sense of community for the diverse people who occupy the Sundarbans. According to the story, Bon Bibi divided the land among herself, her brother, and the demon Dokkhin Rai. Bon Bibi adherents respect this boundary and acknowledge when they have passed from Bon Bibi’s territory into Dokkhin Rai’s domain. The hybrid make-up of the Bon Bibi mantra complicates distinctions between center and periphery, class and caste, and nationality:

For this I have seen confirmed many times, that the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? Flowing into one another they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. And so it dawned on me: the tide country's faith is something like one of its great mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a roundabout people can use to pass in many directions—from country to country and even between faiths and religions. (205-206 italics original)

The orality of the Bon Bibi myth allows it to evolve as it is passed on to the next generation. The porous boundaries between nations, languages, and beliefs that comprise the tide country enable characters from different backgrounds to survive in the messy, shifting terrain of the region. By embracing Bon Bibi, characters share a common tradition while simultaneously maintaining their own differences. Ghosh's description of the landscape places humans in the environmental discussion and equates the changing landscapes with a discursive shift in values associated with certain concepts and practices.

For Fokir, the Bon Bibi myth functions as a way to impose order on the landscape. In the stories told to him by his mother, the dolphins were Bon Bibi's messengers and if he "could learn to follow the shush, then [he] would always be able to find fish" (254). The dolphins mean survival for Fokir; he knows their daily patterns because they lead him to a food source. The Bon Bibi myth constructs how Fokir values the tide country and contributes to his survival and livelihood. Piya's position as a scientist aligns her with a certain ideological outlook. For her, science serves as a way to order the chaotic and shifting terrain of the Sundarbans. The dolphins and their daily patterns are data that she can compile and analyze, but she recognizes the value of

Fokir's knowledge about the rivers from their first encounter. Her willingness to value his local knowledge reveals an openness to alternative perspectives that foreshadows her potential for further transformation. The dolphins in the novel are where scientific authority and local knowledge converge. This coming together of scientific expertise and local knowledge confuses some of the characters: Moyna asks Piya how someone such as her husband, who cannot read or write, can be of help to a highly educated scientist like herself. The combination of Piya's and Fokir's knowledge represents a symbiosis that produces mutual benefit. While scientific study motivates Piya's initial interest in the area, through her interactions with Fokir and Kanai, she develops a greater appreciation and respect for the people, their livelihoods, and their culture.

Ghosh points out some of the less-than-admirable ways science has been used in the past, particularly in colonial endeavors, to address misunderstandings about who poses the greatest threats to the region's ecosystem. Piya relates a story to Kanai where a scientist, not the local inhabitants, causes greater harm to the area's animals. She explains the history of dolphins and whales in Calcutta and the experiences of Edward Blyth, an English naturalist. According to Piya, in 1852 Blyth hears that a school of giant sea creatures has been stranded in one of the salt lakes outside Calcutta. He rushes to the area, fearing that the creatures will be cut up and consumed before he can examine them (189). To his surprise, the local inhabitants had not killed any of the whales: "On the contrary, many people had labored through the night to rescue the creatures, towing them through a channel into the river...Blyth chose two of the best specimens and ordered his men to secure them to the bank with poles and stout ropes: his intention was to return the next day with the implements necessary for a proper dissection" (190). Piya adds that when Blyth returned the next day, his specimens were gone: they had been cut loose by the bystanders (190). Piya finishes her history of Calcutta as a center of cetacean zoology, and Kanai

responds, ““That’s how it was in those days...London was to Calcutta as orca to Orcaella”” (192). The chapter underscores the geographic relationship between the center and periphery and how that relationship affects the production of knowledge. Those in power can control the naming of people, places, and animals, and they can dictate what knowledge is valued and distributed. Piya and Kanai’s conversation ends on a light-hearted tone, but the undercutting qualities of the novel suggest that the reader needs to consider the implications of Piya’s story about Blyth and should proceed with caution when assigning blame and responsibility for the devastation of local species and ecosystems.

In a similar vein, Ghosh challenges the privileged status of technological prowess; Piya is never without her GPS system, binoculars, and other sophisticated devices. The caution evident in the novel’s position can be seen when Piya realizes she has lost all of her data during the cyclone but her GPS map remains. Fokir’s knowledge, years spent on the water, has been saved by satellite technology, and Nilima ponders what it might mean that Fokir’s journeys have been locked away in the stars (328). Ghosh hints at Nilima’s wonderment but never explains her thoughts; the reader is left to decipher what it means that Fokir’s legacy lives on in the ether. The alliance one imagines between Fokir’s invaluable knowledge and the advanced technology that has made its preservation possible initially seems triumphant. But the promise of Fokir’s river journey logs being captured by GPS takes on an ominous tone when one recognizes the potential for technological imperialism implicit in the situation. While Piya’s intentions for the data seem honorable, the destabilizing nature of Ghosh’s entire novel, and Nilima’s “silen[ce] as she pondered the mystery of Fokir and his boat” (328) makes the reader consider the positive and negative possibilities of technological progress.

In addition to questioning the prospects for Fokir's data, the novel presents unintended consequences of technology through its representation of the future of fishing in the Sundarbans. Moyna insists that Tutul go to school because he will not be able to earn his livelihood as a fisherman like his father. She attributes the loss of fish to the use of new nets that catch the spawn of tiger prawns, but which also capture the eggs of other fish. Nilima tries to get the new nets banned but is unsuccessful. Moyna explains why: "Because there's a lot of money in prawns and the traders had paid off the politicians. What do they care...It's people like us who're going to suffer and it's up to us to think ahead" (112). Environmental justice frames tend to focus on the lives of contemporary humans, but Ghosh's representation of the Sundarbans and its inhabitants insists that the past, present, and future requires consideration. Moyna expresses the importance of local inhabitants being able to change quickly, just like the ever-shifting landscape of the tide country. Her emphasis on Tutul's education signals a transformation in "people's hopes and desires" that was not part of the discussion when Kanai first visited the island as a child (112). Ghosh's novel makes the case that along with people being able to change, environmental justice frames need to evolve to take into account the specificity of local conditions in addition to the international circuits of power and economics that influence the issues at hand. In this way, Ghosh challenges environmental frames that are too rigid.

The novel's conclusion leaves the reader feeling uneasy. The final chapter features Piya's return to the Sundarbans with plans to involve the local fishermen and Nilima's Badabon Trust in her dolphin project because she does not "want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it" (327). The happy resolution continues when Nilima explains to Piya that Kanai has restructured his business in Kolkata so that he can spend more time in Lusibari (329). The current global reality of how the environmental and human

rights regime works is represented in the testimonial narrative about Fokir's life that Piya emails to her friends and colleagues in order to raise funds for the new project. The novel demonstrates the relevance of the international community, especially one spear-headed by an American scientist. The conservation efforts in the Sundarbans are a local issue that has been influenced substantially by national and global systems. In an era of increased globalization, designating what constitutes local becomes especially difficult. Local issues are more often than not inextricably tied to global economic, political, and social pressures. When assessing the contributing factors for environmental injustices, it becomes particularly challenging to assign responsibility and/or blame for problems that crosscut multiple institutional levels. It may be possible to pinpoint certain members of the Indian government who ordered the violent eviction of refugees from Morichjhāpi, but it would be very difficult to follow that chain to the economic and political interests that feed the desire for ecotourism and save-the-tiger campaigns.

The complex scalar issues and the difficulty of broad societal transformation lead to the reader's discomfort in the novel's resolution, which is precisely Ghosh's point. Other critics have commented on the tidy, too-convenient ending of *The Hungry Tide*. Mukherjee argues that while it might be tempting to read the ending as a celebration of the elites'—Piya and Kanai—homecoming, the novel “constantly raises questions about its own representative limits by foregrounding powerful autonomous subaltern cultural and material practices” (Mukherjee *Postcolonial Environments* 132), and Jens Martin Gurr suggests that “the awkward ending may indeed be explained by means of the underlying figure of ‘both/and’ the text consistently employs” (75). As Mukherjee and Gurr imply, the resistance to closure exhibited in the rest of the novel forces the reader to be skeptical of the too-perfect ending. Ghosh's carefully crafted

conclusion intentionally leaves the reader dissatisfied and further highlights the global conditions Ghosh questions.

Ghosh's novel does not resolve all of the issues that are presented. Instead, it demonstrates how dialogue and cooperation with local efforts in combination with an international network of concerned and dedicated individuals can transform the way people think about a particular place and its residents. The focus on the two cosmopolitans, Piya and Kanai, at the end of the novel and the dissatisfaction felt by the reader reinforce the difficulty of achieving transformation on the societal level. Piya's association with mainstream environmentalism and Kanai's economic and class status symbolize the powerful institutional models that Ghosh suggests need to be reconsidered.

In the article, "Wild Fictions," Ghosh reiterates the importance of narratives, and fiction in particular, for negotiating the issues that face regions like the Sundarbans. He insists that solutions must involve the people most affected by the siting of tiger reserves, and he traces the symbolic representations of Nature that have influenced how the place and people are treated:

It is my belief that only fiction can provide a canvas broad enough to address this relationship in all its dimensions; only in fiction can a reconciliation be affected between Bon Bibi and Saint-Pierre's recluse, between the quest of a scientist determined to prevent the disappearance of a species and the needs of a fisherman who must hunt in order to live. It follows then that if nature is to be re-imagined in such a way as to restore the human presence within it—not as predator but partner—then this too must first be told as a story. ("Wild Fictions")

Ghosh's claim about narrative reconciliation between Boni Bibi and Saint-Pierre's recluse refers to different traditions of Nature—local inhabitants understand their relationship to the area through the Bon Bibi myth while many international activists and Indians of a certain position conceive of Nature through the Romantic ideal put forth by Saint-Pierre of a pristine place devoid of human inhabitants. Ghosh does not prescribe a return to the Bon Bibi myth for re-imagining nature; he points out the limits of that narrative as well. Rather, Ghosh suggests that the narratives we tell must be able to evolve, like Piya's character. Nothing in the environment is static and so our symbolic representations of it must not be static either. The stories we craft about our place in the world are never complete, which explains why the denouement of his novel feels so incomplete.

Ghosh's fictional treatment of the Sundarbans brings awareness to an area foreign to many of its readers. *The Hungry Tide* destabilizes the idea of fixed accounts and re-imagines what environmental preservation and social justice entails. The novel complicates easy solutions and forces the reader to recognize how her subject position in society affects the environmental stances she chooses, with the acknowledgment that her position, like the landscape itself, is ever-changing and the frames we use to tell our stories must be willing and able to change as well.

Conclusion

This project concludes with the chapter devoted to Ghosh's novel for reasons that have already been discussed, but it seems important to revisit the idea that his text, arguably the most literary and ambivalent of the ones examined, warrants the proverbial last word. The least prescriptive of the textual examples, Ghosh seems most invested in bringing awareness about an area to those who do not know it or cannot even imagine it. The reader is left to consider what her responsibility, and humankind's in general, is to act on that awareness. Ghosh's treatment of the Sundarbans, the "tiger issue," and the role of national and international organizations in environmental devastation and aid, speaks directly to the role the humanities play in environmental justice movements, and the characteristics literature possesses to change the narratives of how we understand places, people, and the nonhuman world. By putting multiple perspectives at the reader's disposal, Ghosh challenges us to recognize the complexity of environmental issues when one adds cultural considerations to the discussion.

In his (reluctant) conclusion to *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell assesses challenges the field of ecocriticism can expect to face. One of those seems especially relevant to the implications of this project: the challenge of establishing significance beyond the academy (Buell *Future* 128). Buell praises the work ecocritical scholars-teachers-activists have accomplished in "breaking down classroom walls" and suggests that a strong argument can be made for the importance of "trickle-down percolation" that academic work seeks to achieve (132, 133). The literature classroom especially, and college classrooms in general, serve as a space to try out new perspectives, to offer counter-narratives and voices from those previously unheard, and to develop dialogue across a range of subjects and viewpoints. Literature's ability to present perspectives that inform and transform one another allow us to rethink, reconsider, and

reassess what narratives we choose to explain how things came to be the way there are. This project's method and argument center on the possibility literature has to change the expected narrative and frame: it suggests that decentering American figures and reader-viewers represent promising ways for transforming the frames we use in environmental justice struggles.

The implication of creating transnational dialogue among environmental justice frames suggests multiple outcomes: environmental justice discourse may not be as coherent as some suggest, and resisting a singular definition in exchange for frames that can evolve, like narratives, to negotiate local circumstances with global connections may be the most effective means for considering how we think about the environment and justice; the importance of learning from movements worldwide that have their own traditions of environmentalism offers possibilities for decentering American and Western perspectives to transform what counts as environmental writing, environmental issues, and to reconceive what nature and the environment entail; and lastly, the significance of the form the message takes has repercussions for who and how many people can be reached. Buell asserts that “changing the subject or [in] changing the archive is every bit as important” as a revolution in critical theory (130). Texts like *Animal's People* and *The Hungry Tide* that have “popular” appeal, and a documentary film targeted for an HBO audience offer the promise of making environmentality indispensable from how one reads literature and digests media representations (Buell 131).

Looking forward, this project could extend its focus to account for the representation of gender in these texts and environmental justice movements in general. The role of female protagonists and female readers-viewers warrants more critical attention. Additionally, the different actors in the American aid regime—doctor, scientist, journalist, translator—could be further examined to compare how authors represent those figures' good intentions and what

potential outcomes, positive and negative, result from their actions. Lastly, the possibilities visual media like documentaries and feature films offer in compliment to more traditional literary accounts for producing dialogue and framing situations in particular ways could be developed more thoroughly.

Piya has an epiphany while tracking the dolphins with Fokir that she may have stumbled onto patterns about the creatures that have not been observed before. She admits that her discovery would not revolutionize the sciences but it would be an honorable contribution to scholarship: “she would not need to apologize for how she had spent her time on this earth” (106). Piya’s recognition of her small, but worthwhile endeavor, returns us to words by Achebe that pinpoint what those concerned about environmental justice can call strive to offer during their time on this earth—understanding, compassion, and respect for others:

The foreign correspondent is frequently the only means of getting an important story told, or of drawing the world's attention to disasters in the making or being covered up. Such an important role is risky in more ways than one. It can expose the correspondent to actual physical danger; but there is also the moral danger of indulging in sensationalism and dehumanizing the sufferer. This danger immediately raises the question of the character and attitude of the correspondent.... Perhaps this difference can best be put in one phrase: the presence or absence of respect for the *human person*. (emphasis added)

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