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# Margins and Mainstreams: American Studies and the Environmental and Climate Justice Movements

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# Margins and Mainstreams: American Studies and the Environmental and Climate Justice Movements

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- <sup>1</sup> In his 1994 classic, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, historian and Ethnic Studies scholar Gary Y. Okihiro wrote about the role of race and racism in what constitutes “America.” Written in the swirl of public contentiousness over identity politics and multiculturalism, the book argued that core national values and ideals stemmed from the margins of US communities, specifically from politically and racially disenfranchised communities. He suggested that it is through the struggles for equality by African Americans, Native peoples, Latinos, and Asians as immigrants and refugees, and by those sexually marginalized, that the United States gradually moves toward the Founders’ values and visions of democracy and freedom. This argument resonated deeply with me as an undergraduate in the early 1990s. Much of what we now call “MAGA” politics (“Make America Great Again”) and Trumpism was led by currents that emerged in California around then, especially through the proposition system that shaped public policy through viciously racist incarceration, anti-immigration, and anti-affirmative action proposals that all passed (Hosang). At the same time, these same currents generated incredible organizing cultures which forced students and people to choose political sides and stances. I was also impacted by place (in addition to time); UC Berkeley was (and remains) an important place for Ethnic Studies. The campus was a hotbed of emergent scholarship and activism in environmental justice that have since gained empirical validation within academia and some policy purchase. This piece is a personal and scholarly reflection on how environmental justice has moved from the margins to the center of the field of American Studies, and how that has affected pedagogy, particularly in the classroom.

- 2 The idea of the margins as the root of mainstream values is one core argument of influential American Studies scholarship. African American literary scholar Mary Helen Washington made such an argument in her 1997 presidential address to the American Studies Association (ASA), “What Happens to American Studies If You Put African American Studies at the Center?” These questions and themes, in some ways, are more settled, while others remain deeply relevant. Washington ended her piece:

I imagine ASA becoming more than ever a place that encourages, promotes, and supports [...] scholarship which moves us toward institutional change. [...] ASA, ideally, will be a place where the denigration that one feels as a person of color, as a poor or disabled person, as a non-native speaker of English, does not obtain. [...] [O]ur challenge is to do whatever is necessary to make ASA a liberated and liberating institutional space. (22)

In many ways, Washington’s hopes for the association and the field of American Studies have been realized. American Studies as a field (and the ASA) is certainly an institutionalized interracial space based on dreams of freedom that centralizes the standpoint of the marginalized. But in other ways, these preoccupations—of *liberated spaces*, or American identities and values—sidestepped what was becoming apparent in that very same moment in the 1990s. Specifically, that is, that the growing understanding that the world, driven deeply by the United States, was on the precipice of a climate crisis. In the first two decades of the new century, climate justice also became increasingly important (the climate justice movement shared many of the same leaders with the environmental justice movement).

- 3 For far too long, my American and Ethnic Studies worldview and my environmental justice movement/research hats were largely separate to the outside world and to each other, even though for me they were always synergistic. When asked by colleagues to give talks, for instance, I would often ask how they knew of my research and which perspective they wanted me to highlight. Those interested in my environmental justice research cared little about my American Studies perspective—and vice versa. Over time, many of the insights of environmental justice movements have slowly become more mainstream within American Studies as a field. But, as Matthew Schneider-Mayerson observed in 2015, it took far too long:

American studies [...] has for the most part ignored climate change and the still-accelerating consumption of fossil fuels despite our awareness of the catastrophic environmental and human consequences. This lacuna is particularly surprising given the United States’ central role in extracting and consuming fossil fuels, developing and normalizing oil capitalism, and denying climate science. If climate change was once seen primarily as a scientific, technological, economic, or policy issue, and thus beyond the purview of the humanities, it is increasingly recognized as a problem deeply rooted in social, cultural, and political systems. (530)

Change is afoot, connected to more general awareness of climate justice and a growing theoretical sophistication within cognate fields, as Michael Ziser, Natasha Zaretsky, and I cowrote in the introduction to our special 2020 issue of *American Quarterly* on “Energy Pasts and Futures.” In the last seven years, qualitatively different from the first twenty years of my career, my American Studies and environmental/climate justice hats are no longer separate and misunderstood. Scholarship in Black and Indigenous Studies, specifically in racial capitalism and settler colonialism, linked the extraction of land and labor in ways that made climate crisis make analytic sense to those scholars who long thought of environmental studies as coming from a “white” and elite perspective. This integration—from a movement and analytic perspective—has, at long last, made

inroads into my American Studies classrooms, where they stood apart for years. To illustrate, until seven years ago, I minimally discussed environmental justice and climate justice in my general American Studies classes—although I did teach an American Studies class titled “Interdisciplinary Approaches to Environmental Justice/Injustice” (Sze, 2016).

- 4 That changed in the last few years, in part because I have long been committed to antiracist, feminist scholarship, and social movement praxis matter in all its forms, including pedagogy, and I realized that discussing these topics to broad groups of students was essential work. One of my central aims in the American Studies classroom is to educate and facilitate the growth and empowerment of the next generation of students, interpersonally and politically (Bayles and Sze). My classroom spaces are aimed toward encouraging and nurturing the next generation who increasingly understand that systems of oppression are interlinked: militarism, incarceration/policing, domination of nature and animals, racial hierarchies.
- 5 My students, whatever their major and background, name and face different social, political, and environmental conditions—or, what I called in my most recent book, “environmental justice in a moment of danger.” These “moments of danger” manifest on the ground against politically marginalized communities of color, Indigenous, poor populations, and women of the Global South, particularly hard. At the same time, these communities actively resist their destruction. Political emergence stems from principled opposition to white supremacy and colonialism, and the forces of capital and the police state that protect them in ways that accelerate climate change.
- 6 Scholars and activists have argued that older mainstream environmental narratives based on declension and apocalypse are not sufficient in mobilizing younger people to channel their “concern” and overall knowledge of climate crisis into action. Knowledge of the climate crisis can lead to feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the problem. Specifically, the question for many students and people now is: will there even be a future worth living in the face of climate-induced chaos? Climate justice scholars have discussed how teaching a generation that has always known about climate change and has always been on the internet is challenging and different than in the past. A colleague at my institution puts on his syllabus on climate change and injustice: “Warning—do not take this class if you are prone to depression.” Environmental studies scholar Sarah Jaquette Ray asks students to visualize what living and thriving in a climate-changed world looks like. The exercise, she explains, is meant to be empowering, only to be met by utter failure. Simply put, her students are unable to *imagine* a future, given what they know about the science and the politics of climate change. She focuses on interiority, channeling, connecting, and thriving as key components of climate activism.
- 7 For me, the answer away from angst and individualized cynicism is to understand that certain peoples have been primed for death, so that capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy can thrive. And that those same populations—Indigenous peoples, the colonized, the descendants of the formerly enslaved populations throughout the world, and others—have always fought the conditions of their socially, economically, and politically structured domination. Classroom spaces were where I learned that environmental, gender, and social injustices are everywhere and that they are also being fought fiercely as we speak. They taught me to join the fight and not just study it—but that study was also essential (Sze, 2021a).

- 8 What do these struggles do to channel climate depression and cynicism into action mean in the American Studies classroom? As I have written about elsewhere, I introduce climate and racial justice perspectives into my large lecture General Education in my “Introduction to American Studies” class. General Education requirements in many US universities and colleges are in place to ensure that students take classes in many different fields, not just in the areas in which they specialize—for instance, engineering students must take some humanities classes. These students are not self-selected as they are in my “Environmental Justice” class. They have chosen to be in the class largely to satisfy graduation and breadth requirements and, ideologically and pragmatically, they have generally just come out of secondary school with little critical thinking apparatus in place. I use Movement Generation’s web series “The North Pole” because it was specifically developed as a humorous take on the climate crisis all the while being a radical, humorous, abolitionist, climate justice narrative (Sze 2021b, Sze 2021c).
- 9 I situate the series near the end of the course, after earlier units that cover ideologies of the American Dream, the racial politics of space and place, imagination and identity, and just after “Trouble the Water” on Hurricane Katrina (a unit I call “American Nightmares”). “The North Pole” is wildly optimistic even as it centralizes Black and Indigenous critiques of racial capitalism and settler colonialism. Its political sophistication is belied by its jokes which, for the most part, “work” for my students. My students are a typical California public university undergraduate classroom: demographically diverse in some ways (my campus is close to fifty per cent first-generation college students), and not in others (the Black and Native population is lower than the state average). I don’t predict that this series will work in the same ways for all instructors: my students are mostly from California, where the series is set, and issues like gentrification and wildfires are tied to many of their experiences. There may be a temporality component as well; this series may not connect in a few years. But I will continue to use it until it doesn’t.

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- 10 Our students now know more politically than I did as an undergraduate in the 1990s. They are under incredible financial stressors, having lived their lives under hegemonic neoliberalism. They face debt far larger than my generational cohort ever did. At the same time, more of them reject extractive capitalism and are searching for community and solidarity rather than individualized competition. It’s our job to be part of that, and other fights for justice. My challenge and opportunity is to cultivate non-naïve radical hope and to help bring the world to a place of balance and justice. One way we can do that is in our classrooms, and in our hearts.
- 11 When I started my professional career, I was first driven by the ideas and activism generated by environmental justice communities and by Ethnic Studies/American Studies scholars. For far too long, I felt like these perspectives were misunderstood by the other. The singular focus that has driven my research, the anger I feel in relation to environmental and racial injustice, remains the same as when I learned about them almost three decades ago. My students now *know* this anger. Our job as teachers and scholars is to contextualize and help answer the “why” and move them to the “how” to make the world a more beautiful and just one.

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