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Critical Voices in Environmental Justice

Reflections on Death, Memory, and Care in Environmental Justice

Vos tenés la bala. Yo la palabra. La bala muere al detonarse. La palabra vive al replicarse.

You have the bullet. I have the word. The bullet dies when detonated, the word lives when spread.
Berta Cáceres

Every day we drink water and every day we die a little. My generation eats and drinks contaminated food and water, so your generation won't have to eat or drink this water or this food.

Maria do Socorro

Critical voices are essential for understanding the intersectionality of sustainability and environmental justice. Space has not been held for these voices in these arenas, be that in the archive, in academia, in environmental policy and policy-making, and in the collective memories of Western environmentalists. This leads to the paradoxical nature of environmentalism where those who are at most risk from environmental degradation, the most affected, and those at the forest front, are the least responsible for that environmental degradation and the least represented voices in environmentalism. These voices include, and are not limited by, categories of race, gender, and queerness.

This essay has two major contestations: first, that death and its memory and mourning forms the roots for the practical manifestations of care, knowledge, and action that constitute justice in response to environmental degradation in communities facing its critical effects.

Second, that it is in this memory—one informed by death, mourning, and the body-territory—and only in this memory, that the greater practice of intersectional environmental justice can form the greater context of how to perform care, action, and the creation of knowledge.

Care and the *cuerpo territorio*

To see justice as an ecosystem, with its living parts as action, care, knowledge, and memory, allows us to see the interactions and intersections of these practices as part of a whole. These four tenets have been developed from looking at the differences between environmentalism of the rich and of the poor. Environmentalism of the rich undoubtedly involves knowledge and action. For this reason, environmentalism of the rich tends to focus on single-issue, financially driven action. Here, electric cars form a simple, financially smart answer to the detrimental effects of oil reliance when only considering the knowledge and action tenets of justice. And here, the detrimental and deadly effects of lithium mining on South American and African Indigenous lands are acceptable for the benefit that lithium brings. Offsetting carbon by buying trees on Indigenous land is a fair trade. The death and destruction of the vulnerable, unwilling, or unvaluable is acceptable as action in environmentalism founded only by knowledge. In single issue environmentalism, the protections for some are more valuable than the lives of others.

By contrast, environmentalism of the poor has been described as the protective actions by poor people who are immediately struggling against the degradation of the environment on which they depend (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997). These actions are fundamentally tied to the body because of the immediacy in which they experience environmental degradation. Environmentalism of the rich relies on a logic of fear of hypothetical happenings if we don't

change our ways. Environmentalism of the poor instead relies on logics of responding to what is happening and has happened to their communities, land, and bodies. In this way, memory and care form an inseparable link to the environmentalism of the poor. Tied to this is an intersectional understanding of experience – reckoning with race, class, gender, and other minoritizing practices as further risk factors, and necessitating an understanding of how to protect those at immediate risk.

The Care Manifesto attempts to bridge knowledge, action, and care for manifestations of justice. It emphasizes valuing care and care work, involved in nurturing, sustaining, and producing life. Rooting our practice, politics, communities, and states in care is proposed as a means to rethink and dismantle systems that devalue life and form a feminist, queer, anti-racist and eco-socialist perspective (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, 14). While I agree that it is a lack of care that has created a world in crisis, and a world on fire, care alone will not put the fire out. In the context of such uncare, resulting in death as policy, death surrounds this conversation more than life and care. The stakes are not ones of care, as they once could and should have been, they are life and death. It is not a lack of the politics of care that have resulted in the death of the body-territory, it's the enactment of a politic of death. When the politics of death form the backdrop for those most at risk from environmental detriment, the effects of care are limited. To shift towards the politics of life and care, memory must root and inform practice.

The reprioritization of activists towards life through memory occurs in the concept of *cuerpo territorio*, and in praxis in Guatemala through Xinka leaders like Lorena Cabnal. Her action is a reclamation of the body as territory, or *cuerpo territorio*, and a critique of the ways that within Indigenous rights' movements, machismo and sexism limit the opportunity and voice of women. The founding of AMISMAXAJ challenged these notions in parallel with

environmentalism by asserting themselves as communitarian feminists, and viewing the body as a living and historical territory. Through this, they have made significant conversations in both national and international conversations in the defense of ancestral territory (Cabnal 2015). Activists in the Global South remain steadfast in their clearly articulated goals of environmental defense through the body as territory – not to be sold, to be recovered and defended.

The Politics of Death

177 environmental defenders were killed in 2022, according to Global Witness's 2023 annual report of land and environmental defenders (2023, 10). Of those, 156 (88%) took place in a Latin American or Caribbean country[1]. 36% of the total environmental defenders killed were Indigenous peoples, and 7% were Afro-descendent. This brings the total number of documented environmental defender killings to 1,910 since 2012 (9). The disproportionate deadly consequences of environmental defense on critical communities showcase the politics of death. These studies do not include unreported deaths or disappearances of environmental defenders. They also do not include those killed as a direct or indirect result of extractivist practices like mining, water management, logging, or land grabbing.

Environmental racism as coined by Benjamin Davis in the United States context is also surrounded by conversations of death. They found in 1987 that race is the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities (United Church of Christ Comission for Racial Justice 1987). These injustices facing poor,

[1] Here, Latin American broadly refers to the portions of the Americas that underwent settler colonial projects by Spain and Portugal. The countries represented in this study are Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Honduras, Venezuela, Peru, Paraguay, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Ecuador. The Caribbean here refers to the countries, territories, islands, and other lands in the Caribbean Sea, here represented by 1 environmental defender killed in the Dominican Republic.

minority, and disenfranchised populations equates to a rise in the risk and prevalence of asthma, obesity, diabetes, lung cancer, heavy metal poisoning, and a range of mental health and developmental problems that can result in death (Landrigan, Rauh, and Galvez 2010). It is precisely these disproportionately life-threatening effects of environmental degradation, through direct or indirect killing, that define environmental racism, injustice, and necropolitics.

Rojas-Perez discusses necropower and necro-governmentality in the context of Peru's missing, murdered, and disappeared as a result of the "war on terror" throughout the 1980s and 90s in Peru. On the act of killing under necropower, he posits:

> "[Killing] cannot stop because, in the continuous re-founding of its order, the state constantly constitutes an 'internal enemy' against which its violence and impunity can be legitimized and justified… This temporality of the unfinished past indexes the work of necropower. It works to produce the network of affects necessary for controlling suspect populations, maintaining domains of immunity that rulers reclaim for themselves to face the 'ever-present threat of terror,' and shaping the collective memory of state atrocity through fear and silencing. This temporality of the unfinished past has the specific effect of perpetuating the ungrievability and unmournability of those whom the state massacred in the recent past as suspects of being the 'internal enemy.' (Rojas-Perez 2017, 231)

In the context of the body-territory and intersectional environmentalism, the internal enemy defined by the state is not one influenced by terror, but instead those with interests in themselves with the earth. They are people unwilling to sacrifice their body, land, or life for the means of capitalist expansion on the earth. In this enactment of necropolitics, if they are not willing to sacrifice for profit and development, they are sacrificed.

Krenak situates necropolitics in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as those who are deemed death-worthy if they are deemed unvaluable. In this context, necropolitics are expanded to the more imminent collapse of Mother Earth due to human actions. Krenak positions sustainability, civilization, and even humanity as contestable, dishonest terms when the majority of people are denied any real agency in the world we are living – "because the world we are

living in does not want or require our input, only our custom" (2020, 8). With the advancement of these terms, there is a necessitation of some to live and some to die. These concepts allow and are in fact built to dispose of those who can no longer produce or refuse to produce for the larger "development" of them. He also posits, "Why have we insisted so hard for so long on belonging to this club [humanity], which, most of the time, just limits our capacity for invention, creation, existence, and liberty?" (9). In fact, this club limits our capacity to live. The dishonesty of these concepts prioritizes consumers over citizens, those who belong to a "humanity" over those who do not and earth, and death over life.

How We Live On

The killing of Berta Cáceres in 2016, who opposed the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam in Honduras, caused an international outcry that reinforced global efforts for better protection (Middeldorp and Billon 2020). Why couldn't Berta Caceres's life be as impactful as her death? Cáceres is a life-long and postmortem activist, who during her life fought illegal land grabs imposed by international corporations and political entities operating under necropolitics. The Agua Zarca dam intended to provide 22 megawatts of generating capacity as clean, renewable energy. As a relatively small hydroelectric project, operating under the tenets of knowledge-plus-action environmentalism, the dam is an easy $64 million answer to the complex problem of clean energy. However, nothing about the project was clean. The planned desiccation of the Gualcarque river and the farmlands that surround it not only put Lenca land and water, but lives at stake. The dam project was heavily protested and contested by Lenca activists and community members, one of whom Cáceres working with the Council of Popular and Indigenous

Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). The dam violated established FPIC standards, but nevertheless, construction began on the dam in October 2015.

As far back as January 2015, Cáceres receives text messages warning her of the risk of being kidnapped, killed, or disappeared by people close to the Agua Zarca dam project. On May 20th 2015, Moisés Durán, who had an active role in COPINH in the land recovery process around Somolagua, Santa Bárbara, is assassinated. In November 2015, Cáceres is shot at on three separate occasions. In the months following, Cáceres and other members of COPINH are subject to multiple violent threats and events. In February 2016, after years of protests and months of intimidation and threats from DESA, the construction company responsible for the Agua Zarca project, the Honduran police and military displace 50 COPINH families from their homes. Cáceres is told by a member of the National Criminal investigation Unit (DGIC) that security forces won't be held responsible if something happens to her. In March 2016, Berta Cáceres was found murdered in her home ("Threats, attacks and intimidation against Berta Cáceres Flores"). These events were transcribed on a website, bertacaceres.org, created shortly after her murder, along with demands, statements, and ways to get involved. The website now redirects to https://www.cancasinos.ca, a website for mobile casinos in Canada. Perhaps it is just a series of server funding issues, an unfortunate domain purchase, and nothing more than coincidence that sites like Wikipedia must rely on an archived version of these events. The timing of the website redirect lining up shortly after the 2021 conviction of Roberto David Castillo, the former president of DESA, in 2021 as a co-conspirator of Cáceres's murder is perhaps coincidence.

Necropolitics, necropower, and necrogovernmentality implicate much more than death of the body. The systematized and permissible death of the body-territory is clear here and in cases involving those at the forefront of environmental degridation. However, what is also clear in the

enactment of necropolicy in environmentalism is a denial of mourning and memory. The threats Cáceres and her body-territory faced, the impending impunity of those involved, including international corporations, governments, and interests, were bigger than her life. It is the reclamation of power in memory and mourning that made the death of Berta Cáceres bigger than her life. It is in this mourning that activists, friends, and the body-territory honor her. And it is in this memory that Berta Cáceres brings justice. The Agua Zarca dam project was cancelled in 2017 with the withdrawal of the FMO (based in the Netherlands) and Finnfund (based in Finland) among the global outcry over Cáceres's murder. It is with this memory that Berta Cáceres remains a symbol of power and triumph for critical environmentalism.

It is in this memory of the body-territory that activists like Maria do Socorro continue to live their fierce lives. Interviewed by Elaine Brum, who says Socorro's body "holds the history of the ravaging of the Amazon," "holds what came before," and is a "record of fierce resistance made flesh." Socorro holds with her the memory of what it is to be *quilombola,* memory of Africa, memory of Indigeneity, and memory of her body's, and her territories', rape. When recalling mining operations encroaching on her body-territory, she saw that "what was happening to the forest was happening to her. Raped like her, bored into like her, its uterus grievously assaulted to rip out gold. Socorro saw herself melded with the forest, flesh of the same flesh. And she understood herself as forest" (Brum 2023). Socorro is a social movement leader, traveling to climate crisis events to make her body-territory and memory known. She lives with kidney cancer as a direct result of the heavy metal contamination of the Murucupi river. Forestpeoples do not deal in hypotheticals. The time may not soon be up—it already is. Socorro is just one of the living already ascribed to death as a result of the necropolitics that plagues the body-territory. If she died today, or in 2016, or when her body-territory was initially invaded, she wouldn't be

recorded by the Global Witness as an environmental defender murdered in their pursuit of justice and defense of the body-territory, but she is.

The body is everything for those on the forefront of environmental degradation. But the deaths of those bodies do not mark an end to their record, but rather continue to inform the practical applications of action in this deadly space. “When the forest begins to belong to human peoples as a form of property, it’s no longer forest. Ownership presumes annihilation of the body” (Brum 2023). And in that annihilation, life becomes a bargaining chip, a renewable resource, and death becomes policy. However, Brum counters, what is said comes into being, and this is the importance of critical voices in environmental studies. As what is bought dies, what is said, and what is recorded, becomes alive.

Futurity through Memory and Mourning

Responses and oppositions to necropolitics in those most affected are varied. However, they share a theme of memory creation, acknowledgement and inscription. While the state remains contested as a site of development for justice, an important practice and shift in environmentalism has come in the form of lawsuits. In the United States, lawsuits are now the primary, and sometimes the only, strategy employed by traditional environmental groups (Cole and Foster 2001, 30). Globally, in cases where defenders were able to take legal actions, 18% of cases reported a court failure while 34% of cases a court success. However, the filing of lawsuits alone does not significantly associate with higher cancellation rates of destructive environmental development projects (Scheidel et al. 2020, 8)

When death and violence is state-sanctioned, justified on the production of social difference, of those belonging to a “humanity” and those who are disposable in the goals of that

humanity, the state is an unreliable medium for justice. The relatively high success rate in courts does not negate this. The accumulation of profits and power will always outweigh attempts to live. For Pulido, the "focusing on a particular racial/ethnic group, rather than racial capitalism, per se, may lead to improved conditions for some, while overlooking capitalism's incessant need to actively produce difference *somewhere"* (2017, 528). I argue part of the reason activists continue to file lawsuits is to inscribe into state memory the death and mourning of environmental defenders. Though the lawsuits may fail, their cases cannot be ignored when forced into state record.

To answer the core question of why critical voices in environmental justice are important, it is because this space in memory is not held for critical voices, particularly those of Black, Indigenous, Black-Indigenous people, Women, Queer people, and the body-territory. Whether in the archives, in academia, in the environmental justice movement, in state policy and collective memory, the mourning and memory of life-and-death struggle in the body-territory is not present. And when action is taken without this memory informing us, $64 million dams form the easy answer to environmental degradation. But in having critical memory, the historical and modern body-territorial context that affects people *with* planet and applying that to our knowledge, our action, and our care, that's where we enter intersectional, critical environmental justice. Critical voices in environmental justice are not only important, but essential in developing a memory-based, care-involved, intersectional environmental justice practice.

There is a misunderstanding that Indigenous futurities are rooted in ancestrality, or a want to return to the mythical "before." This misunderstanding negates the importance of mourning and memory in these actions. When focus is shifted from ancestrality to memory, is not a want or need to return to times before colonialism, neo-colonialism, or neoliberalism that motivates

minoritized and death-sentenced activists. This is an impossible goal. There will never be a time where humanity is unaffected by the effects of necropolitics. However, memory is a lesson that informs the futurity of life. Developmental goals in this case are ones that renew the cycle of self-determination, of control, and of life.

To Live and To Die, and other Cycles

Perhaps the reason so many bury the dead in the Earth is because they know she won't forget us the way we forget her. Life, death, and memory are shared by everything on and with Earth. When the stakes are reduced further than care, further than knowledge and action, down to the roots of life and death, mourning and memory sprouts the cycles of justice. In this, action, knowledge, and care become steeped in the context of death and can then work to sustain, maintain, and create life. Action, knowledge, and care uninformed by this memory do not serve those who must remember.

What comes out of this memory are practical, creative, community-based initiatives of knowledge, care, and action. Memory and mourning become the roots that informs them. If the body is territory, we must mourn the death of both, together. And from that bring care, knowledge, and action. Memory and mourning are revolutionary acts because they exist only in praxis. Necropolitics and its responses do not deal in hypotheticals, metaphors, or theory. The body is territory. The consequences are life and death. The response to necropolitics then deal in the material – in memory, mourning, and the practice that comes from it. In Simpson's "Land as Pedagogy", she shares the goal of community as the re-creation of beings that continually live lives promoting the continuous rebirth of life itself (2014). Simpson expresses a lack of faith in the state's ability to value Indigenous or Black life, but does not have lack of faith in the

possibility of change through community. Land and life can and should be pedagogy – and justice does not come from within systems that were never made to make the earth habitable, but from systems of community that challenge those colonial systems of thought, power, and death. The importance of holding critical voices in environmental justice is in recognizing, inscribing, and committing to memory the material consequences of environmental degradation. With this memory we can critically inform our care, knowledge, and action through the practicalities of life and death.

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