

Green Humanities: A Journal of Ecological Thought in Literature, Philosophy & the Arts

Volume 4 *Eco-Justice*

Article 15

2024

The Activist Corner - Ecojustice Insights from the Field

Coralie Boulard
KU Leuven

Lucas Zabotin
University of Cambridge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/gh>



Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Environmental Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boulard, Coralie, and Lucas Zabotin. "The Activist Corner - Ecojustice Insights from the Field." *Green Humanities: A Journal of Ecological Thought in Literature, Philosophy & the Arts*, vol. 4, 2024 . DOI: 10.25779/pm8g-tg16

This Field Notes is brought to you for free and open access by ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Green Humanities: A Journal of Ecological Thought in Literature, Philosophy & the Arts* by an authorized editor of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

In a recent panel discussion, five activists from different corners of the world came together to share their perspectives on eco-justice in a conversation that spanned continents and experiences. Together, they shed light on its multifaceted meaning and practice, touching on historical roots and contemporary challenges, as well as its relevance to movements and the catalyzing role of art therein. With this digest, we dive into an exploration of the rich contributions of an eco-justice framing to social and environmental struggles.

Panelists include*:

- **Alberto Peruffo da Montecchio**, a radical activist and author in the Veneto region of Italy with a decades-long focus on opposition to militarism and chemical contamination, notably founder of the Political Laboratory for Ecology and the PFAS.land working group.
- **Brian Tokar**, a social ecologist and climate justice activist, author, lecturer and long-time faculty and board member for the Institute of Social Ecology in Vermont, USA.
- **Daphnée Azoulay**, a Canadian activist focusing on the ecological and climate emergency as well as Indigenous rights.
- **Lorenzo Miguel C. Cordero**, a climate justice worker in the Philippines and a graduate student from the University of the Philippines Diliman.
- **Marcel Suter**, a social ecologist, co-founder of Netzwerk für Kommunalismus (Network for Communalism) and active in different initiatives and social movements around climate justice and transition in Switzerland.

**One or more names might be changed for anonymity purposes. The views expressed by the panelists are personal and not meant to represent those of the organizations they are affiliated with.*

What is eco-justice? A common frame for a multifaceted issue

“Eco-justice is the meeting of ecological and social issues. I cannot think of one without the other. They need to pass together”. This statement shared by Alberto, a radical activist and author from the Veneto region of Italy, depicts the resounding theme of the discussion. Each panelist offered different expressions of this common understanding, reflective of the distinctiveness of their on-the-ground realities and underscoring the multifaceted essence of eco-justice. As Marcel, a social ecologist from Switzerland, said: “There are many questions around eco-justice”.

Brian Tokar, a prominent social ecologist based in Vermont (US) who has followed the evolution of eco-justice conversations in the US since the beginning of the movement, reflected on eco-justice’s roots in the contamination of Love Canal in New York to the broader canvas of environmental racism and environmental justice. This first case of contamination led to the discovery of many others making it “increasingly clear that, in the US, people’s racial background was the main determining factor, even more so than socioeconomic status, in terms of who is most exposed to environmental toxins.” Eco-justice thus sounds the alarm around “the disproportionate impacts of environmental contamination on marginalized populations, starting with toxic chemical pollution but expanding well beyond that.”

The eco-justice frame adopted by movements “brought race and class considerations explicitly into the environmental movement for the first time and has sustained that discussion over many decades”, explained Brian. The bridging of race, class, and ecological issues was also underscored in Alberto’s understanding of eco-justice. Drawing from his frontline activism against racism and

chemical pollution in Italy, where polluting tannery industries mostly employed racialized immigrant workers, he shared: “I understood very well at that time that we cannot speak about the justice of the ecological outside of the plants. It is inside the social lives of the people who work inside the plants.”

Over time, the eco-justice frame extended that conversation from environmental issues to that of climate change. Marcel, who first heard of ecojustice in the context of climate justice, noted that among the issues that ecojustice raises is “the fact that those who are least responsible for CO₂ in the atmosphere are the first ones to feel the negative impacts.” This has local and global dimensions, with both “those here at home, such as poorer people who may not be as resilient as those who are richer, being more impacted by rising temperatures”, but also “people generally in the Global South.” Brian also underscored this evolution and interplay between local and global scales. From local environmental struggles came waves of global organizing around global climate justice in the first decade of the 2000s, when climate movements globally insisted on a justice-centered framework in the UN COPs’ commitments to reduce emissions. Ecojustice brought in “a focus on those responsible for the climate catastrophe, historically and contemporarily”, as Marcel justly asserted.

While it is only in recent decades that ecojustice has penetrated public discourse, climate injustices themselves are not recent phenomena. Brian emphasized: “People still talk as if this is a relatively new phenomenon or a relatively new understanding. But the literature on this actually goes way back”. He mentions a UN Human Development report back in the early 2000s that compared per capita exposure to climate-related hazards between the wealthier OECD countries and the Global

South and exposed that disproportionality was clearly apparent back then already. The temporal scales of ecojustice were also and in part the focus of Lorenzo and Daphnée's interventions. They both suggest a historical pattern of targeting vulnerable groups for exploitation, highlighting the need to understand historical dynamics in comprehending the current state of ecology and justice, a perspective that hinges on the long history of ecojustice.

Daphnée, whose work centers on Indigenous peoples and struggles, brought a unique perspective from Canada. "Ecology can only happen with justice, so justice is the root. If there is justice, there will be a sane view of ecology. And I see Indigenous people as at the core of justice". She notes Indigenous peoples' historical role in land stewardship and caretaking and, tracing the historical exploitation of Indigenous lands since the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, she connects patterns of land grabbing to environmental destruction.

Weaving a Philippine perspective into the discussion, Lorenzo's account is one of past and ongoing struggle against environmental exploitation by European powers. "Ecojustice is, for me and especially within the Philippines context, deeply rooted in the legacy of colonialism and imperialism". The extraction of resources by rich nations in the Philippines that has been at the heart of deep environmental degradation, as well as economic exploitation historically still endures today. "So, the struggle for ecojustice and climate justice in the Philippines continues".

What does ecojustice contribute? Unpacking the maturation of struggles

The ecojustice lens has made rich contributions to environmental and social struggles. From unveiling the intersectional nature of issues to reinforcing a call for radical systemic change, ecojustice has become a comprehensive and transformative frame for activists that challenges traditionally disconnected approaches to struggles.

For Alberto, the bridging of social and ecological issues means moving beyond the confines of class-based confrontations. “For a long time, the struggle was between classes. It was the working-class struggle. And there was a big mistake from former Marxist thinking that the struggle was only concentrated inside this situation between capital and workers.” Brian elaborated on the historical separation of environmental and social matters. “For most of the late 20th century left mainly concerned with social justice, environmental issues were considered marginal. On the other side, traditional environmentalists tended to look at the non-human world as the centerpiece and human concerns as less important. Now, with the evolution, of environmental justice movements around the world, I think it’s much more widely understood that the health of people and the health of the natural world as a whole really are completely inseparable.”

For Alberto, “it is a passage of maturity of the struggles.” He further argued that the ecological dimension allows for a characterization of the contemporary challenge not mainly as a class struggle but as a systemic one, aiming to confront the root of the problem within the entire societal structure, encompassing living models, habits, and more. Brian also echoed ecojustice’s transformative and radical ambition: “Ecojustice reinforces the understanding that we need to

focus on systemic causes – both of inequality and the marginalization of people, and also of the disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards.”

Eco-justice also brings different geographical scales into conversation with one another. Brian explained: “There was an interesting interplay with folks who were focused on their local contamination issues bringing those issues and those experiences into the global conversation. The environmental justice activists and anti-environmental racism activists from North America have been in the center of a lot of the international conversations. And they have embraced international solidarity with affected populations from all around the world, bringing this back into their local struggles in the US and Canada and really everywhere”.

Lorenzo offered a unique perspective on how ecojustice’s radical aims reintroduce humanity to its “original purpose”: the continuation of life. He emphasized the divergence between capitalist and ecojustice visions. On the one hand, capitalism is driven by the specific goal of resource and wealth extraction, embodied by practices of production, valorization, colonialism, and domination. On the other, ecojustice draws on ecology’s imperative to sustain life’s metabolism and diversity. It points towards a reconnection with the intrinsic purpose of existence for its own sake, the importance of diversity and the perpetuation of diversity’s fecundity. Ecojustice, in essence, serves to challenge the narrow goals of capitalism and colonialism, inviting a return to a more holistic understanding of existence. It is a reminder of the broader, intrinsic connection between humanity and the natural world, which urges a shift away from the narrow goals of capitalism towards a more harmonious and diverse coexistence between humans and with nature.

What is ecojustice in practice? Bridging ideas and action

Throughout the discussion, the panelists shared insights into some of their actions and struggles. From Vermont to the Philippines, their stories provide a snapshot of the diverse ways in which the fight for ecojustice can take shape.

Reflecting on the various geographical and temporal scales at which injustices operate, Marcel raised some of ecojustice activists' biggest challenges: "Who do we attack? What do we attack? With whom do we work? How? What are possible coalitions?" For Marcel, finance is the biggest culprit. "Finance makes it possible that injustices just go on and on. If we cut finance, then we cut the lifeblood of the fossil fuel industry. We have to fight against the perpetrators of climate injustice. That is the fossil industry and, especially in Switzerland, the international banks." Alberto complemented this perspective by drawing on his own activism in Italy, showcasing that ongoing struggles against multinational corporations and military bases are also integral to the broad ecojustice movement. Brian drew on his first direct involvement with ecojustice in the 1980s when an impoverished community in Vermont discovered water contamination from a commercial dry-cleaning plant. He narrates: "The local issue in that town got people to organize. And eventually they got the state to pay for a new water supply". Struggles for ecojustice can thus also target the state.

Collaboration is key in ecojustice struggles, and critical questions about coalition-building form an integral part of ecojustice activism. Marcel stressed the need to reject a white savior mentality and approach, notably by building coalitions with impacted communities. He mentioned protests

against central banks in Switzerland that not only included locals but also brought in people from the Global South, emphasizing the importance of “finding a shared stance, a shared attitude and acting each one in one’s own context but in the same direction and together.” Alberto painted an expansive canvas of ecojustice activists, emphasizing the importance of alliances between activists, scientists, but also citizens and artists. He mentioned a collaboration with a university that helped give their struggles visibility in the academic world and also in national media. Brian’s activities also reflect the role that scientists or academics can play in the struggles. He served as a science advisor to affected groups in Vermont, and was also in the background of the international climate justice movements, especially the North American actions leading up to the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference. He published many articles on climate justice, particularly in left media, throughout the mid- to late 2000s, which eventually turned into his book, *Toward Climate Justice* (New Compass Press 2010, revised in 2014), probably the first book from North America to be focused mainly on climate justice.

Lorenzo reflected on some of the legal instruments that can be used to sustain ecojustice and brought up some of the challenges in translating social movement victories into meaningful change when implemented by states. He referenced the Writ of Kalisan, a legal instrument and court order in the Philippines that is meant to safeguard a safe, healthy, and equitable environment for the people. Yet, while the Writ of Kalisan was won by social movements, it remains an unused and thus ineffective instrument. Lorenzo underscores therefore how the fight for ecojustice is always ongoing: “What is won by social movements and then implemented by states isn’t necessarily a win overall. Just like in the case of the Writ of Kalisan, they can’t stop there. The struggle for ecojustice continues”.

Daphnée sustained a vision of starting small to create a domino effect in eco-justice efforts. She sees a current effort to have some of the streets named after colonialists in Montréal changed as a potential means to inspire the same action elsewhere and prompt a reflection on land-belonging. She also drew attention to the radical Indigenous Land Back movement seeking to retake control of territories as a proactive and crucial step towards restoring ecology and thus establishing eco-justice. Reflecting on the struggle against the Coastal GasLink Pipeline construction that is cutting the unceded territories of the Indigenous Wet'suwet'en Nation into two, she underscored the necessity of bridging global emergencies with local, tangible impacts.

This patchwork of perspectives shows that ecojustice is a dynamic, evolving movement that requires continual reflection, adaptation, and collaboration. Their stories echoed a collective call to action on all fronts possible.

What is the role of art? Ecojustice's creative catalyst

Invited to reflect on the place and role of art in ecojustice, the panelists collectively recognized art as a dynamic and multifaceted tool for activism. From poetry to music, exhibitions to theatrical performances, art is a powerful vehicle to communicate complex issues, to explore alternative futures and inspire change, and to challenge established power structures. The creative catalyst that is art, as discussed by the panelists, proves indispensable in the ongoing struggle for an ecojust world.

“The most effective social movements have always had a central creative and artistic component”. Reflecting on the music, puppetry, and pageantry of movements such as the civil rights, anti-nuclear, and global justice movements, Brian argued that the arts “help people focus on longer range goals and visions, help people express their connection to the land and their community and other people, and really give movements their inner life”.

Alberto shared examples of how he engages with the arts in his activism. “We experiment with all kinds of disciplines and arts. Not only in the classical places of struggle such as the streets, but also the theaters, assemblies, universities, festivals. There are many things that we can do in our struggles”. This includes collaborations with jazz music channels to create experimental music on the struggle against PFAS in Italy, with graphic artists and photographers to illustrate books, with professional theatre groups to craft plays that were presented in theaters and television. Echoing Brian’s reflections on the performativity of movements, Alberto also shared how theatrics play a significant role in actions. For instance, in one assembly where authorities were invited to discuss with activists, they chose an amphitheater for the location: “We were on the stage and the authorities were front row. For a couple of hours, we overturned the authorities”.

Daphnée, whose skill set includes writing poetry, shared an appreciation for the political potential of her work. Reflecting on her journey from self-centered poetry to a more activist-driven approach, she mentioned using poetry as a way to awaken, as a means to generate a human connection with the environment by arousing emotions but also stating facts. Daphnée is notably

exploring the potential of using poetry during protests, where activist poems could be shared through megaphones in order to reach a broader audience than traditional literary platforms afford.

Marcel reflected on exhibitions of Indigenous art in Europe that presented non-Eurocentric, fundamentally different views of nature and human-nature relations to Europeans. He also gave the example of Zapatista art that showcases their different way of life. “The point is that this is also an educational platform.” Art in this sense becomes a productive means to learn across geographical and cultural boundaries, and to foster fundamental shifts in our imaginaries and ways of doing.

This perspective was shared by Brian, who emphasized the crucial role of art in the utopian tradition. In the diverse and long history of utopian thinking around the world, art has been a rich mode of expression of aspirations for a better world, for a different future. “It keeps our visions alive for possibilities of the different future, which is more important now than ever”.

A red thread was that of art’s power to invigorate the radical scene and to confront power. “Usually, art and culture are used by the powers to keep the people quiet. But we also have that power to express our opposition”, said Alberto. Inspired by a radical exhibition that made it into a museum in Vicenza, Alberto marked the importance of piercing into those institutional spaces: “It is inside the system, inside the power, inside the circuit of classical use of art. And it is important for us to go inside with our art, with our tools. Because otherwise the system is not able to understand that we are against them.” He emphasized: “Our enemies are not able to control all these different kinds of expressions of the people”.

Challenges and prospects? Ecofascism versus social ecology

Adding to its traditional opponents, the panelists emphasized the increasing threat that ecofascism poses to ecojustice. Brian traced a history of ecofascism and the resistance within mainstream environmental organizations against extremist anti-immigrant views. Marcel expressed concerns about its escalation, especially in the US and Europe, where fears of climate migration are resulting in concepts like “Fortress Europe”. For Daphnée, the alarming rise of ecofascism, where far-right ideologies intersect with environmental concerns, poses a threat to vulnerable communities. For her, the division of the left is nurturing the ecofascist rise. Marcel highlights a dangerous shift where ecofascism abandons environmental concerns in favor of outright fascism, driven by anti-immigrant sentiments. He also argued that ecofascism creates a distorted form of environmentalism that prioritizes narrow, nationalistic interests over global well-being, pointing out opposition to renewable energy projects due to aesthetic concerns. They all stressed the urgency of vigilance, unity, and informed action in the face of this rising threat.

Panelists reflected on the strong contributions that social ecology, as envisioned by Murray Bookchin, can make to the advancement of struggles, the crafting of desirable futures, and thus the opposition to ecofascism. As Alberto reflected, social ecology argues that the domination of nature by man is a result of that of man by man. It posits a critique of domination as a whole which can only oppose ecofascist tendencies to dominate man in order to restore ecological well-being. This is echoed in Lorenzo’s reflections on social ecology’s project of diversifying and continuing the fecundity of diversity, rather than domination.

For Brian, “social ecology contributes a critique that also helps us to see beyond the limitations of justice discourse”. The discourse of justice is one that is easily manipulated by different tendencies, including ecofascists. A selective vision of justice is employed, for instance, to produce racialized narratives of territorial exclusivity, white nationalism, and exclusionary environmentalism, where justice for local communities is envisaged as a defense against the perceived threats of immigration or overpopulation. Another limitation of justice discourse is that it tends to foster limited, legalistic solutions instead of transformative, systemic ones.

Drawing from Murray Bookchin's work, particularly *The Ecology of Freedom*, Brian explains how justice discourse emerged historically as a response to increasing restrictions on people's freedoms, especially as institutional hierarchies began to form in various cultures. He suggests that, while justice importantly serves to challenge inequalities within these structures, it also inherently operates within the framework of existing power dynamics. Justice, if sought alone, holds a sort of complacency with the constraints of living in a world dominated by hierarchical and oppressive institutions, as it seeks to remedy the symptoms but not tackle the root causes of it. Instead, “we can aspire to a broader understanding of human freedom that goes beyond the limits of justice discourse. One that reclaims some of the ancient practices of reciprocity and complementarity that we know about, especially from contemporary Indigenous writers who have continued to express and explain the values expressed in their diversity of cultures.” For Bookchin, synthesizing traditional modes of cooperation with the legacies of individual freedom and the notion of universal humanity from Western culture would allow for a more fully evolved concept of human freedom to be achieved. For Brian, Murray Bookchin's social ecology presents a holistic

framework for envisioning human freedom that transcends the confines of traditional justice discourse.

While utopianism was discredited and marginalized in many ways during the Cold War era, social ecology has remained steadfast in its commitment to revitalizing and reclaiming the utopian tradition. By grounding its vision in the principles of ecological sustainability, social justice, and participatory democracy, social ecology offers a compelling alternative to prevailing dystopian narratives. It provides a roadmap for envisioning a more equitable and harmonious society, one that prioritizes the well-being of both humanity and the environment. Social ecology, argues Brian, provides a vision for an alternative future that can empower individuals and communities to imagine and strive towards a world that transcends the limitations of the present. And “the importance of keeping our visions alive for possibilities of a different future are more important now than ever.”