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## Environmental Justice and the Challenge of Black Lives Matter

David N. Pellow

AS I WRITE THESE WORDS, representatives of the world's nations are meeting at the United Nations Conference of the Parties 26, to once again attempt to forge an agreement on tackling the wicked problem of global anthropogenic climate change. And although today is just the first day of that gathering, I can say with total confidence that whatever they do, it will be too little, too late, and long on posturing and photo ops while short on substance and action. There can be no doubt that the world's most powerful governments and corporations will continue to perpetrate mass atrocities against our life support systems—rivers, oceans, forests, the air, land, soil, water, biosphere, and climate.

And there can be even less doubt that they will continue to do the same to marginalized peoples of the earth—in particular, peoples of African descent. Hence the clarion call from climate and environmental justice activists the world over that there can be no climate justice without racial justice. More to the point, there can be no comprehensive and workable solution to the climate crisis without simultaneously addressing the intertwined crises of antiblackness, white supremacy, and racial injustice more broadly. That is because racism and racial violence are social realities that comprise the foundations of capitalism and modern statecraft, the mechanisms driving climate change.

The very institutions and organizations that constitute our market and governmental infrastructures (which, in turn, have produced sustained ecocidal violence) were birthed and/or made possible by settler colonialism, invasion, chattel enslavement, and genocide. In other words, racial violence is baked into the core of the U.S. and world economies. What that means is that justice and equity should never be framed as secondary to the effort to achieve environmental and climate protection; they are required for a healthy ecosystem and climate, and they

are critical for our survival. It is for these reasons that veteran environmental and food justice activist (Baba) Orrin Williams once told me, “I don’t see the functional difference between genocide and ecocide.”

As I write these words, I am listening to the news coverage of yet another murder of a black man—Ahmaud Abernathy—who was gunned down by white men in Georgia, claiming they were trying to make a “citizen’s arrest” of Abernathy, who was apparently guilty of “jogging while Black.” The “citizen’s arrest” law they invoked stems from the era of chattel enslavement and was designed to ensure black captivity and subservience to white supremacy. I note that, in this case, the term “citizen” is clearly meant only to refer to people with white skin—a haunting and lethal illustration of the long and bloody reach of the state, its legal system, and the blurred lines between policing by officers of the law and by white vigilantes, both of whom function as agents of the racial state.

As I write these words, I am filled with certainty that the ever expanding field of environmental justice studies has a lot to offer with respect to expanding our understanding of the ways in which state and institutional violence directed at black communities can be reframed in socioecological terms, and how resistance against anti-black violence in any form can be as well. In this extraordinary collection of articles, the authors take this analysis to new and generative heights across multiple disciplines, research methods (including the use of social media, ethnography, and historical methods), theoretical traditions, and diverse geographies. The subject matter covered across the articles in this issue is vast and breathtaking.

It includes a theorization of how we might confront environmental privilege through decolonizing the green city; a meditation on supporting food justice across the African Diaspora; an examination of the relationship between prison abolition and disaster resilience and mitigation; an extension and application of the critical environmental justice framework to the black radical tradition and black radical ecologies; the introduction of

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the term “spatialized intersectionality” to better grasp the ways in which gender, race, and age converge in particularly hazardous zip codes; an analysis of the harmful ways in which policing and mass incarceration produce and reproduce environmental injustices; the application of critical environmental justice to a struggle over a proposed microgrid; an exploration of the powerful role that social workers play in efforts to buffer black communities against environmental racism; a consideration of the key roles that radical growers play in the movements for land, food, and environmental justice; and an engaging analysis of the groundbreaking efforts of MOVE that demonstrates how this organization long predated critical environmental justice in its approach to state violence and the racial discourse of animality.

As I write these words, I fondly recall that the idea for this special issue came about during a conversation among members of the *Environmental Justice* editorial board. We were looking for scholarly work that pushes our thinking about race, racism, antiblackness, and environmental justice in new, unexpected, and impactful directions. I was honored to be asked to serve as guest editor for this collection, and I am overjoyed at the high quality and caliber of the work contained herein. This special issue of *Environmental Justice* features articles that expand and challenge the received wisdom on antiblack racism and the Black Lives Matter movement (and the Movement for Black Lives) by reframing associated

topics through the lens of environmental justice theory, methods, and politics. The reality of state-sanctioned violence against peoples of African descent is on full display for the world to see, recoil at, and respond to. Scholars have explored the economic, cultural, political, and psychological dimensions of antiblack racism and our responses to this deadly phenomenon. However, we urgently need a deeper grasp of the environmental and ecological dimensions of this challenge to more fully comprehend the driving forces behind it and to develop more effective scholarly and policy frameworks for confronting and transcending it. The authors of this special issue have answered the call to take creative and bold approaches to these daunting challenges, and I am delighted to see their study in print. Their study reflects the power of the written word to bring new realities and radical possibilities into existence.

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