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Putting Environmental Injustice on the Map: Ecotestimonies from the Global South

Erin S. Finzer
University of Arkansas - Little Rock, esfinzer@ualr.edu

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Putting Environmental Injustice on the Map: Ecotestimonies from the Global South

Abstract

This introductory essay to STTCL 39.2 discusses the importance of testimony as a flexible literary genre that can tell the stories of environmental injustice in the Global South, which is disproportionately affected by environmental violence and less represented in the growing global environmental movement.

Keywords

ecotestimony, environmental injustice, Global South, testimonio, resistance literature, climate change

Cover Page Footnote

This special issue was compiled in fond memory of Nao Ueda, environmental activist, urban homesteader, and friend.

Putting Environmental Injustice on the Map:
Ecotestimonies from the Global South

Erin S. Finzer

University of Arkansas, Little Rock

A while back, I posted to Facebook a link to the Climate Stories Project, which features an interactive global map of individuals' oral histories bearing witness to climate change. I commented about how exciting this multi-media storytelling project was, but complained that all of the testimonies were located in the Global North.¹ A friend then made the comment: "Maybe that's because climate change doesn't exist outside of North America?" Implicit climate denialism aside, his comment drove home for me the importance and timeliness of this special issue of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, "Testimonies of Environmental Justice in the Global South." Because voices from the poor communities of Asia, Africa, and the Americas (collectively known as the Global South) can be hard to hear, it is imperative that the global environmental movement seek out these voices and help them to communicate to the rest of the world how climate change and environmental injustice disproportionately impact everyday life in their communities. With its trademark urgency and implicit call to action, the genre of literary testimony serves as a flexible and compelling intervention for telling the stories of environmental injustice across the earth. Moreover, newly on-line and open-access, *STTCL* is ideal for publishing on environmental testimonies because it does not require the trees or fossil fuels that paper journals entail and it is capable of reaching readers anywhere.

Particularly vulnerable due to tropical locations, precarious living conditions, and neoliberal economic practices, the peoples of the Global South increasingly find themselves victims of environmental violence that they did nothing to create. In fact, in the new millennium, environmental violence stands likely to threaten global human rights on a scale equal to or greater than that of the combined political repression, warfare, and genocides of the twentieth century.² Environmental violence includes both environmental degradation—in the forms of contamination and the abuse and depletion of natural resources—and climate-driven natural disasters, such as hurricanes, typhoons, heat waves, overpopulation, extinction, wildfires, water problems, superstorms, extreme flooding, drought, mudslides, and changes in ocean temperature and sea level.

Much has been written on why issues of climate change and environmental degradation have gained little traction in the Global North. Climate denialism tends to follow the fault lines of political and economic ideologies, and environmental psychologists have cited anxiety, apathy, a lack of empathy, and

melancholy as common emotional responses to the overwhelming problem of climate change.³ Recently, Naomi Klein wrote about how “market fundamentalism has systematically sabotaged our collective response to climate change,” making us feel “not only incapable of self-preservation, but not worth saving” (62). No matter where one falls on the ideological and affective spectrums, confronting environmental violence on a global scale will require that the North adopt a radically different model of civilization whose economy and culture are not dependent on third-world labor and fossil fuels.⁴ It will also require a fundamental change in the stories we tell: starting perhaps with the early writings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Western narratives position humans as separate from, and in dominion over, nature. We must find ways to re-interpret and re-frame these master narratives in a way that engenders humankind’s responsibilities of environmental stewardship and sustainable living, as well as empathy towards the non-human world.

Changing our cultural narrative is where writers and critics have a stake in the global environmental movement. Powerful storytelling counts among the most effective forms of activism as speakers and writers use story to build empathy in audiences, and persuade them to join their cause. Especially in testimonial literature, storytelling can empower the individual telling the story, as we can see in the now classic titles of Rigoberta Menchú Tum and Domitila Barrios de Chungara, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la consciencia* (1983; literally, ‘My Name is Rigoberta Menchú, and This is How my Consciousness was Born’; published in English as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman From Guatemala*) and *Si me permiten hablar... Domitila, una mujer de las minas de Bolivia* (1978; *Let me speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*). Yet another use of testimonial literature is simply working through trauma—be it due to social or environmental violence—thus allowing activist writers and readers to continue their struggles for justice.⁵

Ecocritic Rob Nixon remarks on the difficulty that Western civilization seems to have with coming to terms with climate change and the need for storytelling. He writes about the “slow violence” of environmental degradation and the need for literary and filmic interventions to make it more visible. He states that “imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear,” and that it is the job of “writer-activists [to] offer us a different kind of witnessing” (15). This special issue of *STTCL* features just such writer-activists and critic-activists who engage the genre of testimonial literature to imagine and give voice to diverse experiences of environmental violence in the French and Spanish-speaking Global South.

Scholars have disputed testimonial literature—or texts that give voice to subaltern subjects bearing witness to violent events—since Cuba’s Casa de las Américas first awarded a prize in *testimonio* in 1970. Initially conceptualized as a

separate literary genre in Latin America, testimonial literature can be found throughout the world as subaltern texts that contest official versions of oppression, atrocities, and abuse. Testimony, which was once viewed as a “true,” non-fiction narrative of witness involving a subaltern informant and an educated interlocutor, is now accepted as a broader genre—and even, I would argue, a discourse—of witness that includes creative works in narrative, poetry, theatre, and the visual and performing arts.⁶ These diverse texts share both their urgent accounts of violence and a collective cultural critique of hegemonic power structures that reinforce and reproduce political, economic, and social violence in myriad forms.

Especially since the controversy surrounding the veracity of Rigoberta Menchú’s 1983 testimony, hundreds of critics have explored the troublesome nature of the genre. During the seemingly peaceful, neoliberal 1990s and early 2000s, many critics began to wonder if testimony was dead.⁷ If testimony enjoyed its initial moment during Latin America’s armed conflicts of the 1970s and 80s, I suggest that we are on the verge of a second wave of testimony that engages not only political violence *per se*, but also systemic and environmental violence that is right now being waged across the Global South. To my definition above, then, I add that texts of this second wave of “ecotestimonio” (a term that seems to have originated with Louise Detwiler and Alice Driver) actively critique the power structures—in particular, those of neoliberal capitalism—that reinforce and reproduce environmental violence in all parts of the globe.

The six essays in this special issue approach ecotestimonies of the Global South in six different ways, but they are ordered in a way to call attention to the themes or perspectives they share in common. The first two essays look at environmental testimonies that are also detective novels. In “Teaching ‘Global Learning’ through the *Ecotestimonio: Ojos negros* by Eduardo Sguiglia in Class,” Laura Barbas-Rhoden walks us through teaching Sguiglia’s novel—which spans Argentina, Angola, and Mexico—with values-based rubrics and activities that enable students to combine critical analysis and global thinking by revealing the deep economic structures of transnational exploitation and consumption underlying the text’s narrative structure as crime fiction. Barbas-Rhoden ultimately leads students to understanding how environmental stories are inherently human stories in which we all play a role through our choices as consumers.

Julia Frengs analyzes two detective novels from New Caledonia as environmental testimonies in her essay, “Anticipatory Testimonies: Environmental Disaster in Claudine Jacques’s Fictional Prophecies.” Here Frengs explores *L’Âge du perroquet-banane*, *Parabole païenne* (“The Age of the Parrotfish, Pagan Parable”) and *Nouméa mangrove*, which predict environmental catastrophes that will come as a result of Oceania’s abandonment of indigenous

culture and wisdom. Frengs explains that, as detective fiction, both of these novels ultimately “question truth and attempt to expose exploitative practices that have damaged the environment” (4). Interpersonal crime is woven with environmental crime, and the reader joins the fictional detective in discovering the evidence that reveals the guilty party, whether an individual or a system.

Resha Cardone and I both engage Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to link environmental devastation and the violence wrought by late capitalism. Drawing on the pile of debris that represents for Benjamin the ongoing catastrophe of history, Cardone’s essay, “Nona Fernández’s *Mapocho: Spirits in a Material Wasteland*,” explores the spiritual and material realities of waste in the contaminated Mapocho River, which cuts through the city of Santiago, Chile. Contaminated with urban, agricultural, and industrial waste, the river was also used for dumping the remains of disappeared activists after the Pinochet coup in 1973. Cardone shows how Fernández’s novel is composed of palimpsests of waste: present-day pollution piled upon unwanted cadavers. Flowing through the city, the river and its contaminated load haunt the landscape and the novel’s main characters. Together, the blighted city, the living, and the dead present a gothic, postmodern wasteland that meshes questions of national history, family, and exile with urban decay and environmental ruin.

In “Bleeding Mud: The Testimonial Poetry of Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua,” I frame this 1998 superstorm and harbinger of global warming as Benjamin’s storm of progress. I analyze how testimonial poetry—a genre once used in Sandinista workshops to work through trauma from the civil war—gave Nicaraguans a way to give voice to the human suffering caused by Hurricane Mitch. Characterized almost universally by images of mud and messages of disbelief (in God and in the sheer level of devastation), this poetry bears direct witness to a climate catastrophe, which I refer to as a “punctuated moment” in the slow violence of climate change.

Joel Postema also works with Nicaragua, or the fictional country of “Faguas,” in his essay, “Testimonial Ecology in Gioconda Belli’s *El país de las mujeres*.” Postema argues that, as a sequel to Belli’s 1988 testimonial novel *La mujer habitada* (*The Inhabited Woman*), *El país de las mujeres* (‘The Country of Women,’ 2010) destabilizes the genre of testimonial fiction by fancifully presenting Faguas as an ecofeminist utopia. Earth plays a defining role in this narrative by way of causing a volcanic eruption whose gases cause testosterone levels to disappear, thereby allowing women to take over the country with eco-friendly policies and infrastructure.

Finally, in “How to Listen to the *Pachamama’s Testimonio*: Lessons from Indigenous Voices,” Luis Prádanos García and Leonardo Figueroa Helland present another visionary, Earth-centric text that defines the Andean movement, *El Vivir Bien* (‘Living Well’). As a collective, open-access text, *El Vivir Bien*

como respuesta a la Crisis Global ('Living Well as a Response to the Global Crisis') foregrounds Andean cosmology and ethics as a model of living sustainably and with integrity in a globalized world. Prádanos and Figueroa argue that, by privileging a community of indigenous voices in the first-person plural, this text interpellates Northern readers as part of its collective and compels them to listen and heed its ancient wisdom about living in community with all creation. As part of their critical article, the authors translate extended segments of *El Vivir Bien* into English in an effort to make key parts of this heretofore untranslated text accessible to the English-speaking world.

El Vivir Bien concludes this issue by reminding us how testimony as a collective intervention can engender and inspire social movements that both challenge the structures that contribute to global warming and offer alternatives to unsustainable, consumer-minded cultural practices. Because these alternatives are indigenous to the Global South, they are also more compatible with the global realities of overpopulation and climate change than high-tech, dollar-driven sustainability that tends to be propagated in the North. As part of what is now a tradition of Latin American popular movements that have capitalized on the Internet in recent years, *El Vivir Bien* demonstrates how texts in the digital age can literally amplify local voices, putting them on the map.

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned the map associated with the Climate Stories Project, which provides individuals from across the globe with the guidelines (in English) and web tools to share their stories as a form of environmental activism. The Climate Stories Project draws from the public story theory of organizer and sociologist Marshall Ganz, who reminds us that stories connect individuals to communities, that they teach us how to act and inspire us to act. The kind of storytelling that Ganz promotes for social movements like Occupy and 350.org (an online network established by environmental activist Bill McKibbin for global grassroots climate organizations) is not unlike testimonial storytelling, which intrinsically link individual voices to the collective by testifying to oppression that affects the whole community. These texts carry an intrinsic sense of urgency that, as Kimberly Nance has written, leaves readers with no alibi for inaction (165). In just this way, testimonial storytelling is an activist intervention.

Challenging the master Western narratives of man's dominion over nature and neo-capitalist ideology, ecotestimonies from the Global South have the potential to change the stories we tell ourselves and future generations. Advocating storytelling as activism, conservationist Peter Forbes writes about what is at stake with activist storytelling:

Without these stories of connection and relationship, there is increasingly one dominant story to hear and one story to tell. This is the story where the

point of trees is board feet, the point of farms is money, the point of people is to be consumers, and the point of other species is largely forgotten. In failing to tell a different story, we fail to express what we really love.... We lose an important part of ourselves. (13)

By eulogizing threatened or lost loved ones, land, well-being, and opportunity, ecotestimonies tell a different story about what human communities value. As tiny points on a map, these stories form a constellation of empowerment and resistance to denial and inaction, connecting otherwise alienated populations to each other. The engaged criticism in this special issue of *STTCL* participates in this project of connection and solidarity by commenting on the vital importance of these testimonies of environmental injustice. Often left out of the classroom and off the bestseller list due to linguistic, market, and geopolitical barriers, the stories they highlight here remind us that environmental violence is a global problem that is disproportionately experienced by people living in the Global South. Perhaps more significantly, they position us as readers, critics, translators, and educators to have an affective stake in making sure the Global South is adequately represented and heard in the growing global environmental movement.

Notes

1. At publication, Eflada Bautista of Tacloban City, Phillipines, had added her testimony about Typhoon Haiyan.
2. For more on the impacts of environmental violence across the Global South in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see Parenti and Klein's *Shock Doctrine*.
3. See Lertzman, Weintrobe, Norgaard, and Marshall on affective responses to climate change.
4. Klein has recently made headlines by reiterating this scientific and sociological consensus with her recent book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. See also her 2011 article in *The Nation*, "Capitalism v. the Climate."
5. Critics Marta Caminero-Santangelo and Michelle Lynn Brown have written about working through trauma in Haitian and African testimonial literatures, respectively.
6. In his first chapter of *Testimonio*, Beverley acknowledges that *testimonio* has existed across the world, probably with its beginnings in the oral traditions. He

cites Barbara Harlow's term "resistance literature" as a way to open the genre to world literature (31).

7. For more on this debate, see chapter 6 of Nance.

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