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Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, and the Rights of Nature

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The 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington, DC, was a pivotal moment in the evolution of environmental justice activism and dramatically shifted the focus of my critical work. Creative representations embodying the spirit of this event began appearing almost immediately in fiction. The novel by Ana Castillo, *So Far From God*, for example, depicts mothers in a small New Mexican community transforming the Way of the Cross Procession—a Catholic religious ceremony—into an environmental justice event. Having lost children to toxins released into their water, air, and soil by factories and mines sited near their politically and economically disadvantaged communities, Castillo’s mothers talk about babies born with brain damage, and incidences of cancer clusters. “We . . . care about saving the whales and the rain forests,” they declare, “But we, as a people, are being eliminated from the ecosystem, too.”¹

This passage reveals debates around “sacrifice peoples” and “sacrifice zones” that were gaining currency in the American Southwest but were not yet on the radar of most ecocritics and mainstream environmentalists. My first book analyzed representations of sacrifice zones in Native and Ethnic American fiction and called for ecocritics to pay more attention to the “literatures of environmental justice,” which I defined as fiction, poetry, films, art, movement manifestos and declarations, regulatory agency statutes, and international trade agreements that represent grassroots and legal attempts to reconcile concerns for human rights with the survival of nonhuman biotic life.²

Today my ecocritical praxis continues to focus on literature of environmental justice and also involves biosemiotics, which is the study of qualitative semiotic or communicative capabilities that are considered to exist in a variety of nonhuman life forms, from the largest redwoods down to the simplest organisms living in the soil. For example, I am currently engaging in analysis of two works that focus on forests and forest dwellers: the documentary film by Juan Carlos Galeano, *The Trees Have a Mother* (2010),³ in which Indigenous Kokama villagers living near Iquitos, Peru, tell versions of stories about Sachamama (Mother of the Forests) they learned as children, and the novel by Richard Powers that won a Pulitzer Prize in 2018, *The Overstory*, about nine Americans whose unique life experiences bring them together to address deforestation.⁴

Building on environmental justice discourse that recognizes the interdependency of people and places, I flesh out the historical, sociopolitical, and ecological contexts of the voices and struggles of the contemporary Amazonians in the Galeano film, discussing their relationships to a cosmological person they name Sachamama. In movement manifestos

such as The Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth and Climate Change (2010), stories about forest mothers and river spirits are collectively referred to as "cosmovisions, thousands of years in the making" and are understood as complex ecological literacies articulating human relationships to nature.⁵ Sachamama is described as a person who can take either human or nonhuman form and who is understood to be a spirit protector of actual trees/forest ecologies. An ecocritical reading sets these stories into the specific cultures, histories, geographies, and contemporary political contexts out of which they emerge in Amazonia, and explicates how the stories provide an Indigenous philosophical framework for negotiating daily survival in a complicated globalizing world. For example, in the film, Kokama villagers deploy stories about Sachamama to indict loggers, miners, oil companies, and agribusiness enterprises for failing to ask "permission from the mothers of the trees" before overexploiting regional forests, which leads to drought, erosion, and terrible consequences for the health of humans and animals. The film illustrates how telling stories about forest mothers becomes a strategy for contesting the legal and economic analytics of corporations and nations that justify deforestation and its linked environmental injustices for forest dwellers.

The people in the Galeano film say that Sachamama once protected or spoke for trees and animals, but with so much deforestation and pollution, she is retreating deeper into the forest and can no longer serve as a protector being. Therefore, humans in the contemporary world must step into the role of Sachamama by becoming modern protector beings who pass laws giving legal standing to trees and forest creatures. This illustrates how Indigenous stories still commonly told throughout Amazonia are playing a role in the passage of rights of nature legislation in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia.⁶

The legal arguments and science undergirding notions of personhood for trees and forests in the Galeano film become more powerful when considered alongside Powers's *The Overstory*. In the novel, a giant coastal redwood is unapologetically anthropomorphized and named Mimas by two environmental activists who view it as a living entity and unsuccessfully try to save it from being felled by a logging company. Mimas is a savvy and deliberate reference to the influential 1972 essay by Christopher D. Stone, "Should Trees Have Standing?" which catalyzed a forty-year campaign for "rights of nature" that gained traction most notably in Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, New Zealand, and the United States.⁷ Stone argues that if slaves, women, children, and even corporations can be granted legal personhood or standing despite cultural and historical arguments to the contrary, then ecosystems and nonhuman species should also be granted personhood in courts, constitutions, and governing agendas. The fictional dendrologist, Patricia Westerford, that Powers creates, is engaged in biosemiotic research that suggests notions of legal standing or personhood that have a scientific basis and should not be perceived as merely myth or obscure legal language. Westerford discovers that trees are social beings, nurse sick neighbors, and warn each other of danger by sending electrical signals across a fungal network in the soil known affectionally among real-world biologists as the "Wood Wide Web."

This brief analysis of the Galeano film and the Powers novel, in the context of environmental justice discourses, emerging rights of nature legislation, and biosemiotics, suggests the ways that ecocritical readings can undergird cultural and legal shifts toward perspectives and laws that acknowledge the interdependence of all species and the ecosystems that make life on Earth possible, while encouraging humans to become knowledgeable and responsible protector beings.

Notes

¹ Ana Castillo. *So Far From God* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993), 242.

² Joni Adamson. *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 129.

³ Valliere Richard Auzenne and Juan Carlos Galeano, *The Trees Have a Mother: Amazonian Cosmologies, Folktales, and Mystery*, 2008, <http://digital.films.com/play/WNHAND>.

⁴ Richard Powers, *The Overstory: A Novel* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018).

⁵ "Preamble," Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth and Climate Change, World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth (April 22, 2010), accessed September 17, 2010, <https://pwccc.wordpress.com/programa>.

⁶ See for example, chapter 7 in the Constitution of Ecuador, *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente*, (July 19, 2008), accessed April 20, 2011, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>.

⁷ Christopher D. Stone, "Should Trees have Standing?—Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects," *Southern California Law Review* 45 (1972): 450–501.