
Interview with Julie Sze

conducted with **Gerald Taylor Aiken**

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Julie Sze is a Professor of American Studies at the University of California in Davis. She is also the founding director of the Environmental Justice Project for UC Davis' John Muir Institute for the Environment. Her works have regularly engaged with key issues of the Justice Spatiale | Spatial Justice journal. Julie is known as a scholar of Environmental Justice and Climate Justice and her work regularly engages with questions of community. In this conversation Julie talks about her latest 2020 book Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger, the importance of storytelling as a methodology and key part of the scholar-activist's toolkit, why community is so fraught a topic, and what restorative justice can offer as a frame.

This book focuses on new forms of environmental justice movements in the US, such as Standing Rock or Flint. Standing Rock refers to a protest against a new oil pipeline to be run through or near indigenous lands of the Standing Rock tribe. The resulting protests against both new fossil fuel infrastructure and the damage these pipelines would do to local water supply, alongside sites of cultural and historic significance, gathered many various indigenous, and then national and international protests, and became something of a cause celebre for the international climate justice movement. Flint conversely refers to a public health crisis where poor and particularly ethnic minority areas were exposed, by their water supply, to harmful, even deadly levels of lead and bacteria. When this was eventually exposed, it led to the shaming and public prosecution of the officials responsible, a process still ongoing.

Gerald Taylor Aiken (GTA): Hi Julie, in the special issue here, we have a number of papers based on the ways community is involved in environmental justice in quite an expansive sense. I'm delighted to do this interview with you as I see you and your research as engaging with community and environment is a really rich way—building up from actually existing examples on the ground, but always aware of your own politics and

positionality within the examples you speak to—so having that scholar-activist voice, and connecting to participative methods is great to round this off. So, to start I'd like to ask you about the role community plays in your work—in relation to these other commitments and analytical frames, but also in relation to the various ways community is used theoretically.

Julie Sze (JS): Yeah, I think if you did a word search of both any book of mine, or any article, you'd probably find "community". I think I use it all the time, but it's not always interrogated. My feelings about community are quite personal. I have both a vexed relationship to any idealised notion of community, but community is also something that I have known and experienced. I understand it, it's very grounded, place-based, experiential, but also it's something I am never completely part of—so, I have a fraught relationship to any notion of community as an identity. It's the in and out that shapes how I relate to community, and that comes up so heavily in my work too. It's that connection to a place is what drives a lot of an activist's commitment to protecting their neighbourhood from a development proposal. That deep relationship to place that often has a multigenerational narrative around it. I am very sympathetic and deeply aware that that is often at times how activists come to be activists and also mobilise people for their campaigns. This sense that "our park was like this, and now look what's going to happen to it". This threat—will the land on the waterfront for example, be developed for X, Y, or Z, and how is that tied to the changing demographics of the place—is basically a gentrification-context activism.

GTA: So, in your book *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger*, you talk about the idea of "moment"—in how Walter Benjamin uses it—and you draw a great deal on this present moment, or crossroads. I'd like to ask you a little about what this conjuncture says to use about community initiatives for environmentalism and community theory. What is the moment now for community?

Given the rise of the far-right, around the world, but particularly in the US, does this change how critical scholars should approach community? For example, there's a shift from the more communitarian (inclusive) perspectives on community that were more prominent in the 1990s, like Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (1995; 2000), set against the backdrop of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and Gerhard Schröder. These had community as a "good thing". And more critical scholars like Iris Marion Young would draw attention to the exclusionary aspects of community. Now we have a background context with more of a focus on community having a hard in/out boundary (eco-fascism in terms of

environmental movements, or just plain anti-immigration). Should the job of the critical researcher be to pay attention to the more enabling aspects of community (collectivising subjectivity, to increase agency—e.g. in protests like Standing Rock, Keystone XL¹), or should remaining critical of community be the task at hand? To say there is something about being together, and acting together that produces its own form of agency—is that what we need to bring attention to at this juncture? Is that the *moment* we are in now? To be more positive about community?

JS: So for me, community is deeply embedded in identity, but it always has that dual edge to it. It's a motivator for a lot of people to become engaged, but it also can be really fraught. David Pellow wrote about this in his Chicago book (2002)—where there are multiple different African American communities, who have different relationships to garbage incinerators. So, you can never make overall claims about “what the Black community in Chicago think”. There's just too much variation based on all these different factors: including race and its intersections with class and power and so on. So I think, for me, community is deeply related to identity, but it's a fraught and incomplete one. I see community's immense psychological value. I do believe it to be a huge way in which environmental justice activists emerge—at least those that are spatially based—in a neighbourhood that is a lot of the ground for this. But there's also, on the other side, a lot of internal dimensions as well.

What I find really interesting, and one of the things I talk about in the book is that there's a way in which I think some of the more recent organisations and movements, is the way in which the fight is local *and also* connected structurally to these others. In that way, what I've found most interesting in Standing Rock or Flint, is the ways these campaigns showed their solidarity. It wasn't to do with identity. It was to do with the political stance that they were taking. Saying that their fights were connected, and that wasn't tied to space, or identity, or even their neighbourhood.

GTA: Is there a way in which this more vanilla type community—relationships in place, the multigenerational one, bounded in a neighbourhood you mentioned earlier—when it's used environmentally is a *reaction to* a proposed development. This could be a proposed incinerator, or something like in Flint where there was a reaction against an environmental harm, an introduced injustice. But Standing Rock conversely is a much more *proactive* sense of community. Where people are coming together to try and do

1. The Keystone pipeline is a major new piece of fossil fuel infrastructure, planned to go through Standing Rock Sioux reservation. This site became a location for protest, combining both environmental concerns and also indigenous rights.

something new. I guess there is a reaction to the pipeline, but it's not that spatially delimited community. It's a community of protest. As you talk about it in the book, this form of community is not at all homogenous, it's so diverse.

JS: Yes, I think that defensive localism, I just don't think that's how the environmental justice movement stands right now. You can see that is both Standing Rock and Flint. They were always positioning their struggles with other struggles. Some of those were global struggles. Even to the extent of connecting with Palestinian Solidarity groups coming to Standing Rock. And also, I'm influenced by a lot of the US indigenous groups, which are highly networked, and connected globally. That idea of community as a defensive localism, it's just not the same when we're talking about indigenous tribal communities. And, of course, it's fraught, but in Standing Rock you had something like people from 300 of the 500 federally recognized Native nations coming together—that's a powerful example of that call to action being embodied in space. And I think that that is why it was so powerful in that movement.

One of the things I talk about in the book is the saying of Robert Warrior (Osage) who talks about "home-not-home". And I think that idea captures that's it's not an either/or. There's always multiple layers. These things are highly networked. For me, the state of the environmental justice movement that I can see, certainly in its US context, is pretty sophisticated. I don't see much defensive localism. The work I'm doing just now is on the Climate Justice Alliance, and Climate Justice coalitions based in California. Their alliance structure is really interesting. I'm not sure how they negotiate their politics—but the alliance structure is that they are both locally grounded, say in New Orleans, or the Bay Area, but they relate and they connect and together as allies. Then they advance, they produce a theory of politics of climate justice. Really, in the US it's focused around the idea of fenceline/frontline communities—first impacted, worst impacted and least responsible. So they're still very locally grounded, but they are not at all defensive or parochial. That's just not the way it reads to me.

GTA: Connected to this more defensive localism, it does seem to me like there's a modal shift from the type of stuff you're talking about to earlier ways community has been understood in environmental justice, like *Dumping in Dixie* (Bullard, 2000)? I don't want to be dismissive of one approach or the other, but just to chart that evolution.

JS: Well, yeah. There is a very big shift from *Dumping in Dixie*. David Pellow talks about this as critical environmental justice—the first generation, second generation, and third generation. In his four features of critical environmental justice, one of them is a

multiscalar component of it. This is not really my area of research, but I'm sure this is connected to technological advances—changing modes of how activists relate to each other, and also how activists communicate to a public. But, yes of course there's a modal difference, and that reflects many different things—not just conceptually, but also empirically and technologically.

GTA: One of the things I love about *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* is some of the methodological descriptions. In your descriptions of Flint, you talk about the importance of storytelling in community. I'd like to ask about this as both a methodology, and a form of community-building. What is it that storytelling reveals as a methodology? And should it be something that community researchers really build on going forward?

JS: I think storytelling is the easiest, most familiar way that people outside the academy can engage with the work we do. There's a lot of work that happens that can seem so forbidding or technical, or involves methodologies that feel so distant (as the geographic information system [GIS]). It also helps just to organize these fundamental questions which are tied to the environmental justice movement, and justice movements overall. Whose story are you telling? How is that story going to be told? Whose story needs to be told? What purpose is this storytelling? Who is this for? These are very broad but essential questions. One of my collaborators has a recurring saying that our movements need to look like us, need to sound like us, need to move like us. We can't be just people around a big table talking policy. There has to be kids around, there needs to be old people, and there has to be food! You know? It doesn't mean everybody has to have the same thing, but just that there has to be a sense of life. Otherwise it's just a policy briefing. Or a class. I mean a boring class—not a fun class! There's a need for other methodologies and empirical documentation. Even policy briefings. But the movement parts are more than that, and our research needs to reflect that. To even get to the point of having something suitable for the policy briefing, there's this whole reflection of the movements that needs to be lived and having the movement that creates a culture and a necessity to create the will to pass the legislation that targets the environmental injustices. That's what movement building is. And storytelling is such a big part of that. Storytelling is the most inviting, the least technical and forbidding, it's the most creative—you know bringing young people into this. Young people can and should be taking the lead here, and in what that looks like.

I really do believe storytelling is key. It's not the stuff that gives you the million dollar grant, but it's the stuff that creates relationships and goodwill. Especially now in a pandemic time, it's the reason why storytelling matters is that you get to be in conversation with other people. On a fundamental level. Even in a non-pandemic time it's hard for people to communicate across boundaries. Spatially, or race, ethnicity, migration background, whatever. But a storytelling project is really meant to be a capacious, inviting, life-giving one. And I think that's like a beautiful thing.

Very rarely do storytelling projects go nasty. Generally, they're so capacious. They get bigger. They pull people in. And that's exactly what we need more of. There's never going to be just ONE story of X, Y, or Z.

GTA: So the way you mention it in the book is not only this praise of storytelling, but also outlining storytelling as a technique which reveals something. Not only to the researchers, but also to the participants themselves. This is also one of the insights from the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal work. Is there a way that storytelling is not only an academic methodology, and can reveal information of an already existing community to the researcher in a way that fits the group in a much more appropriate way as you say, but storytelling can also produce community? In that it can bring into consciousness a collectivity around an issue that was previously unknown? Storytelling can be the point community can coalesce around, and produce a feeling of solidarity?

JS: So in the Flint experience that is clear. It does produce something. I remember at the time being confused about why Tracy Perkins² wanted to do this *Theatre of the Oppressed* methodology. At the time I didn't fully understand it. I just thought these activists would talk about their problems and then we would have an expert on environmental health, and then another two experts—like the typical model to have three experts and a commentator. But, really, I'm a scholar who doesn't understand body and performance and theatre, and doesn't do it, and can't facilitate it. But I saw there was something really affectively powerful, that was more transformative for everybody in that space than the three talking heads model would be. The Flint performance was so interesting, in the way it worked was that they actually implicated the mainstream led policymaking efforts as a performance of violence. They did it as a trial—that was really interesting. They went through and exposed the levels by which bureaucratic violence and normal process is a form of racism, but also silencing. Big ideas, which normally wouldn't

2. www.tracyperkins.org

be there. There's something really powerful and that can connect when you're doing it all as a trial. Doing it in the actual space—between Flint and Detroit.

It's like that whole pedagogy of the walk—the pilgrimage. You are creating the temporary affiliations. I do use community as a lazy default all the time...

GTA: That's what it's for!

JS: ... but this is community too. It's just that moment of assemblage of who's there in that space and time. It's not something that's permanent. It's just temporary and then it goes away. For me there's something really creative around that. For me there's something really beautiful about that.

GTA: I was struck by this quote in your book: "affect and emotion related to climate change and cultural destruction are often (unsurprisingly) shaped by lived realities of class, nation, and community" (p. 82). The pages before discuss community's capacity to be adaptive, and a key aspect of what makes climate resilience. I want to push this further. For example, in places and contexts where extreme forms of adaptation are required. In contexts such as Managed Retreat, the lived realities of community are dissolving. In much of the South Pacific, or Indigenous islands groups, their nation is dissolving too. What then gives shape to one affective reading of the climate crisis, where one's whole social and physical context is in flux, in contexts of loss and abandonment?

JS: I don't know the managed retreat literature, but I do know from these really salient cases in Alaska, but also in places like New Orleans. There are places already being relocated onto the mainland. So there's this really existential questions of what makes a tribe a tribe. If they can't eat on the land or do the things that they used to, things that were their cultural practices. So, questions like "where do they go?", I think those are pretty fundamental questions.

I think in a lot of ways it's the organising that creates the community feeling. So for example in the Marshallese community—they're some of the biggest and most vocal voices on climate change—especially the young people. A large community has settled in Sacramento. The identity Marshallese use as climate justice activists is not the same as would be used on the Marshall Islands. It's because they've been activated as climate activists in Sacramento, around this displacement from the Marshall Islands. And so that's the different thing.

In another example, around indigenous issues that there is so much we don't know and are just not taught. So, I'm really loath to talk too much on this, but as I understand and read it, there's lots of examples of Californian Indians who have been displaced from their ancestral lands, but are still constituted as a community—whether formally recognised or not, for over a hundred years. There's one band of Californian Indians who were forced marched after a massacre, about 120 miles away. They are still together constituted as a community, and they are still fighting to get that land back. For me that's a remarkable example—and one of many in California—of communities which still exist, even without a place, through displacement. And in reading through these tribal histories where these questions of identity, relocation, land back are really salient, it's not something I really get into, but by calling it "restorative ecological justice" I think it's something that can capture that tribal context of things like the growing landback movements. By looking at these examples, and what they're fighting for—it's fascinating to think about the tribes like the one in New Orleans, whose land literally doesn't exist anymore.

And, of course, these struggles look really different in Louisiana as California. By talking about restorative ecological justice I have to look at the examples that exist—tribal communities really trying to actually do this, whether it's relocation or land back, or other forms. The identity for the Marshallese diaspora in Sacramento is not about only being from the Marshall Islands, it's being a Climate Justice activist in Sacramento. The identity is tied to this lost sense of place. It's identity, but it's also not just cultural practice—it's land, and loss of land.

GTA: And the links there with restorative justice are really live there. Restorative justice is maybe something we've missed as a journal in JSSJ. What is it about restorative justice that captures attention at this time?

JS: I know it's not a well-developed perspective. To me, I put it in the book because there are ways in which—what I try to do in the book is to see the ways in which there are these parallel conversations. And what does it mean to actually think about them in relationship to each other. And in part because that's the way my mind works, and that's the way these movements work—it is to connect all these things that seem pretty separate, but we say it's all connected. That's why, if you look at the climate justice movement, they're talking about a pretty broad agenda. Talking about climate means dealing with capitalism, it means dealing with incarceration, it means dealing with colonialism—and those are only the big categories.

One of the things that I find really interesting is that in political ecology there's all this talk about what is ecological justice vs environmental justice. But within ecology itself there is the idea of restoration ecology, and within criminal justice there's the notion of restorative justice, and so for me to put these together is not to say that I've worked this through. But that we need to think broader, and not just have these isolated conversations. In restoration ecology: what are you restoring it from? and into? What does it mean in relation to landback movements? For me, I write this coming from California where the landscape here is completely transformed—this is not what it's supposed to look like. I mean it's marshland originally. Instead we have this drained-out industrial agricultural landscape. So I don't even know what restoration ecology means in California. It's partially tied to those older conversations about invasive species, and how are you going to decide "when" is this moment, and this return to some kind of prelapsarian state of nature. So, for me—and I haven't worked this fully through—but there's a really interesting fundamental question. A lot like the fundamental question of how do you constitute a community when you don't have the geographic space anymore. For me, restoration ecology raises the fundamental question of who is restoring it? To when? And how? And then also bringing in the criminal justice, restorative justice, and transformative justice is really about healing the heart. You are not just punishing the person who did this harm. I wanted to put these two together because in all this there are so many big questions that need to be thought through. Just thinking about accountability, harm and past harm reduction, but transformation to something different. I don't think restorative justice has been talking about that much anywhere—not only in this journal—and maybe it will have no uptake. But if you look at Indigenous environmental science, I think you'll see a lot of what I'm beginning to think can be called "restorative environmental justice". I'm not invested in the term, or advancing the theory, but to me this is just where the conversations are going. For me, restorative justice is useful because it does raise the really big questions.

Perhaps it doesn't work outside the US system of tribal communities. But then I think this could be important for any colonized landscapes. I do think there's an interesting aside in the climate justice movement groups who are talking about "the emergent global majority". I think we'll see much more of these discussions and ideas. Thinking about the landscapes of Brazil, and really the entire colonial world, then maybe it is a useful concept.

GTA: What I really like about it is that phrasing of the word, it's really not this bland catch all term, like "sustainability", "sustainable development" or whatever, but it really is a phrase that has a call on it—it's an "on the move" term, you know?

JS: Where I'm really trying to go is to connect climate justice and abolition³. If you imagine the carceral-state, the petro-state and the anthropocentric-state, and on top we have smaller efforts to overcome each one. But each of these frames has a thing that they prioritise but there also are things that they omit. Including things like who speaks for them, or what kind of justice will be needed to overcome them. And so we have abolition and climate justice as parallel but not intersecting discussions. What I argue is that there is a trend within climate justice is to actually link these states—petro, carceral and anthropocentric—so we can then think about demilitarisation, decarbonisation, decarceration as being connected projects, as opposed to independent things. And justice is so crucial to this.

GTA: And so this all fits under what you're gesturing towards as restorative ecological justice?

JS: Possibly! Yes. One of the key aspects is the cognitive domain that connects all these. Especially when you think that before abolition these things were just unimaginable. So that during slavery, people just could not imagine enslaved people not being property. So one of the key aspects is that there's a key cognitive imaginative leap that needs to happen. And there's this big moment, that I think a restorative justice and climate justice can actually bridge all these different strands.

GTA: Julie, thank you.

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Bibliography

3. Abolition here refers, first and primarily to the abolition of slavery. However, it is also used more broadly to refer to other continuing forms of systemic racial injustice that endure from the legacy of slavery, despite the fact that slavery has been formally abolished. Prison abolition is the most prominent of these (as seen in the work of Gilmore, 2007), through there are many other injustices captured by the call to a more general abolition: land ownership, access, housing patterns, patterns of employment, etc.—seen in reference to various calls to abolish private property, or wage slavery, amongst others. Reference to many of these can be found in the new [journal Abolition](#).

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