Noreen Duffy: Ecojustice Project

Critical moment

When I was 19 years old, I had the opportunity to do a study-abroad quarter in rural Central America through contacts I had in the Catholic church. My mother had been on several trips to our sister parish in Tierra Blanca, El Salvador and I was excited to go and further my Spanish skills and spend time living outside of the United States. What I was not expecting was to have my heart broken.

Tierra Blanca is a small farming town in the south-eastern department of Usulután. In 2007, the roads were not yet paved and running water was temperamental, often shutting off midway through washing dishes or taking a shower. Most of the inhabitants of the town were agricultural workers in the fields outside of town, but very few owned their own land. This was common in El Salvador, like in other former Spanish colonies, where 4% of the people own 60% of the land, and 40% of people living in rural areas own no land at all.

Historians of the area remind us that for much of El Salvador's existence post-invasion, 14 families controlled more than half of the country's land. These families focused their extensive farming operations on coffee, sugarcane, cotton, and indigo; destabilizing the local ecosystem and condemning many of the native inhabitants of the country to malnutrition if not outright starvation.

The inequality of land ownership (along with blatant voter fraud and the massacre of community organizers, priests, and other innocents by a US-backed right-wing government) was a key issue during El Salvador's civil war from 1980-1992. While the leftist FMLN guerrilla forces fought the government's military to a standstill leading to the peace accords in 1992, it was not until 2009 that the country elected its first FMLN president.

One of the many ways the government failed its citizens during that time was by inadequately controlling the import and usage of pesticides and fertilizers, leading to a national epidemic of kidney disease in the rural areas- including Tierra Blanca. I'm telling you all of this so I can tell you about Richard.

Richard was a teen in Tierra Blanca who I never saw out and about playing soccer with the other boys. He moved with difficulty and appeared jaundiced and bloated most of the times I saw him. At the age of 15, Richard was dying of the same kidney disease that had killed his father without ever having set foot in the fields- but I didn't know any of this until the day he passed. Far from being a terrible and rare occurrence, his neighbors accepted his death with quiet resolution and the knowledge that preventing his loss was out of their hands.

At his funeral, I watched his mother cry. I felt simultaneously helpless and filled with anger. How could a boy who was only a few years younger than me be the victim of what felt like such an outrageous lack of care for the natural environment and the people who rely on it?

Was no one paying attention to the human cost? What would have happened had this been in my hometown? I didn't have good answers, and I still don't. It all still feels so terribly unjust.

In the intervening years, I have come to the concept of eco-justice through a human perspective. I understand the importance of caring for our environment because it is our one and only home, but at the end of the day, caring for my fellow human beings is what motivates me to act. I am lucky to live in a country with at least a few climate regulations on the books, and in a city surrounded by natural beauty. Many of my students, colleagues and friends do not have that luxury. Richard certainly didn't.

My Catholicism is the strongest moral guide I have when it comes to eco-justice. Pope Francis' 2014 encyclical *Laudato Si'* declared that "the science of climate change is clear and that the Catholic Church views climate change as a moral issue that must be addressed in order to protect the Earth and everyone on it." It is an incredibly forceful stance for the papacy that had previously been suspiciously silent on the matter of the destruction of our environment, and one that the world's 1.2 billion Catholics shouldn't ignore.

I'm writing this sitting with the air conditioner running in an office at a Catholic university and I see signs of eco-consciousness all over campus. There's even a dedicated receptacle for pizza boxes! But we should be doing more. Most of Gonzaga's students will leave their four years here without ever reading *Laudato Si'*, or even hearing the term "climate change" outside of a science classroom. Therefore, it feels important for me to bring this issue to my students. Richard's story deserves to be told, and so do the stories of all we've lost due to the lack of eco-justice for the most vulnerable.

Theoretical framing

In my research, I found the Queer Ecojustice Project and found that their mission accurately reflects a large part of my theoretical framework. Below is an excerpt from their About page, which touches on many of my own thoughts.

> *We prioritize leadership from people who are most impacted by the cisnormative, white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, settler-colonial heteropatriarchy system that is also the root of environmental degradation- as such, people of color, two-spirit, undocuqueer, trans*, gender non-conforming, and folks with dis/abilities are centered, highly respected, and encouraged to get involved.*

Onto this framework, I propose the following for an ecojustice definition specific to my particular context (an out non-binary adjunct professor at a Jesuit university):

1. *Cura personalis*- "Care for the person," is a tenet of Ignatian spirituality, which in its original sense refers to educating/caring for the whole person. In an eco-justice sense, I'm adapting this idea to include the dimension of place when considering a whole person.

2. *Laudato Si'*- the 2014 papal encyclical by Pope Francis. In this he reminds Catholics and all people "of good will" that we

> have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.

3. Tied into Catholic social teaching is the liberation theology movement. Stemming from response to the 1968 Bishop's Council in Medellín and very popular in Central and South America, one of the core beliefs of liberation theology exhorts us to draw links between exploitative capitalism and ecological destruction and making sure to recognize "the link between poverty and ecology, the 'cry of the poor' and the 'cry of the Earth'." (Source)

4. I acknowledge the multitude of intersections present in any person's life, which for me means sitting with the tension of being a reasonably affluent white person living in the United States while also being a member of the queer community. More specifically, the space I occupy as a cis-passing queer "woman" grants me less social capital than my male peers.This probably falls more under "feminism," but given that there are queer, trans, and non-binary bodies present in all communities, even (or sometimes especially) in the areas most impacted by climate destruction, I feel that "queer liberation" is more appropriate here.

5. A holdover from my more passionately leftist undergraduate days is my lingering unease with participating in and benefitting from capitalism and the social injustices it promotes. A few of the more directly interconnected pieces of my anti-capitalist beliefs include opposition to:

   a. Exploitation of workers and extraction of resources in the global south.

   b. Devaluing labor, product, and art, especially that which is considered "women's work."

   c. Government inability or refusal to adequately protect and provide for its citizens.

   d. Promotion of racial and gender inequalities based on the white, cisheteropatriarchy of the United States and other exploiting countries.

6. Finally, I turn to speculative fiction for a roadmap to the future. Frequently referred to as "science fiction," I prefer the title "speculative" because it does just that- allows us to speculate on what might have been different, what can be changed, and what our future could look like. The current fad of adding the suffix *-punk* to various other genres betrays the original definition of "punk." What is punk if not being loudly and passionately anti-authority and pro-systemic change? The one mashup term that I **do** agree with is the idea of *hopepunk*. According to Wikipedia, works in the hopepunk subgenre are "about characters fighting for positive change, radical kindness, and communal responses to challenges."

Based on the above, I propose the following framework:

Queer Ecotheological Hopepunk.

Literature review

The first study I reviewed was published in 2012 involving data gathered in 2008 and 2009 during the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DEDS). It analyzed trends from nine countries in Latin America and the Caribbean: Cuba, Bolivia, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic. This study dealt with the difference between environmental education and sustainable development, based on open-ended survey responses that were then analyzed for common themes to generate a second questionnaire. The study found that there was an overall tension between environmental education and sustainable development education- namely that environmental education focuses on critical analysis of the current reality, while sustainable development is accused of "protecting the values and principles of the economic system that has generated the current obscene global inequality and an unprecedented ecological crisis." The authors argue that environmental education exists in its current form as a palimpsest of the discourse that was supposedly erased by sustainable development education, the writing of a new text which distorts the original message of environmental education. The idea of a palimpsest is especially fitting for the way that neoliberal consumerism has co opted the language of ecojustice in much the same way that medieval parchments were scraped clean to be overwritten; the ghost of the previous discourse remains.

Further examining the Latin American context, Schneller's longitudinal study of a middle school environmental learning course that experimented with experiential and service-learning approaches outlines a potential course of action for introducing themes of ecojustice in unlikely places. The course and research surrounding it was designed to address the causes behind bioregional environmental problems, explore the physical environment, and promote the practice of personal pro-environmental behaviors and public outreach. The geographical location of this study was in the coastal town of Pescadero in the Mexican state of Baja California Sur, where many of the students' parents were agricultural workers. This site is additionally interesting as the school there was part of the Telesecundaria initiative, launched in Mexico in 1968 as a means of extending lower secondary school learning with television support to remote and small communities at a cost inferior to that of conventional secondary schools. The addition of an experiential and service-learning based ecojustice course was wildly successful despite initial qualms regarding its departure from traditional Mexican schooling traditions. The longitudinal aspect of this study reinforced that students who were learning in this program were not only retaining and implementing actions based on their new understanding of ecological stewardship, but were also re-teaching those concepts within their families, leading to an increase in intergenerational ecojustice discussions and actions.

A 2004 literature review by McLaren & Houston synthesizes sources from the fields of eco/environmental justice and critical revolutionary pedagogy. Using examples from their specific Southern Californian contexts, they posit that justice towards nature can be linked to

many other objectives of critical revolutionary pedagogy. The authors state: “Given the pervasiveness of environmental crisis in our everyday lives and vocabularies, we argue that critical educators can no longer ignore questions of ecojustice.” This idea is sadly prescient considering the current ecological destruction due to wildfires in Southern California. Published in 2004, this literature review highlights the Bush Administration’s “hijacking of environmental protections and the criminal environmental record of his administration,” a trend that has clearly continued in subsequent administrations that have led us to our current state of disaster. What was once an ivory tower thought exercise has now become the lived reality of many residents who had previously declined to explore the link between capitalist dehumanization and ecological destruction.

The current wildfire destruction in Southern California is being reported on live by ordinary citizens, providing a human dimension to the climate crisis that many of us in the United States had overlooked up until this point. Reminiscent of the role camera footage played in shaping the politics of a generation during the Vietnam War, the current ease of uploading, reposting, or livestreaming culturally significant events has been key for the development of our current understanding on the times we live in. While some are quick to dismiss this, we need only look at the role of Twitter in turning global attention on the Arab Spring protests and demonstrations in 2010-2012, or the coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests by non-journalists to see the effectiveness of bringing global awareness to a cause.

With that in mind, the studies reviewed previously were either foundational texts or older research that relied on the available methods of the time. With the increased availability of internet access due in part to cheaper smartphones in the past decade, information has become more readily available than ever before. In areas that were previously too remote or with populations too small to warrant specific outreach, many are now able to more easily participate in global discourse. However, many such opportunities are still academic in nature and use specialized vocabulary and forms that are not easily accessible for those outside of post-secondary education. Increased internet access and different platforms for content such as YouTube and TikTok have given this younger generation the ability to consume and produce media in a much more accessible fashion.

In a study by Hautea et al. that examined climate justice hashtags on TikTok over a period of 3 months in 2021, researchers found that the format of the platform’s content made it easier than ever for users to engage with content in non-traditional ways. Reminiscent of the impact the invention of the printing press had on literacy, and in keeping with the ways that technology to amplify voices across the globe, video platforms offer access to information without involvement of gatekeeping forces both institutional and linguistic. The TikTok content analyzed by researchers was overwhelmingly produced by non-experts. Additionally, content took non-traditional forms, often using humor or the social capital of users to promote climate activism. Even as someone currently doing postdoctoral studies, the accessibility of the topic, and comprehensibility of language in these short form videos has positively impacted my own ability to engage with topics and issues outside of my areas of expertise. Could this be the way forward; not only for climate activism and education, but for education on the whole?

Context & Methods

When I lived in El Salvador in 2007 and again in 2009, the options for educational programming of any sort were severely limited by physical restrictions. Was there a school or community center within walking distance? Were the roads between remote communities reliably traversable? Was there a knowledgeable facilitator willing to go where their expertise was needed? It remains equally important to consider the issue of funding. With little to no help from the government for formal education at any level in the rural communities I worked in, educators of both children and adults were expected to perform miracles with very little financial or material support. For example, the elementary school I taught music at had no electricity, an average of one textbook per ten students, overflowing classes, and no support for struggling students or their teachers. Not only were the conditions for learning in these schools absolutely abominable, students were seldom provided the opportunity to continue their education beyond primary school. There were several social factors that contributed to the generally low graduation rates, most notably the need for children to help their parents in the fields, and a high teenage pregnancy rate. Additionally, the enduring collective trauma of the Salvadoran Civil War- including not only assassinations, massacres, displacement both internally and internationally, and the disruption of formal schooling in many areas meant that there is a large percentage of Salvadorans that grew up in that time who remain functionally illiterate.

Bearing in mind this additional context in the communities I lived in, I met with Don Julio who is the lead organizer of the Parish Emergency Fund over Zoom to learn more about the ecojustice and health education work that the Catholic church provides. The Parish Emergency Fund provides not only financial help for medications, but transport and logistics management for dialysis patients, as well as community education programming about many of the region's deadliest health issues such as kidney failure, hypertension, and various cancers.

This interview was facilitated by a younger community organizer and good friend of mine who had grown up in the post-Civil War educational context, but has since been able to further her education, outreach, and organizing work due to the increasing availability of the internet. In the course of the 45 minute conversation with Don Julio, I learned much more about the educational programming being implemented in the parish. The intent of this initial conversation was to understand the current methods and their success rates in order to see how my doctoral studies and teaching experience might help improve educational and health outcomes for members of the parish.

Analysis

As with most effective organizing work, it was necessary to begin with establishing a relationship, and defining the shared reality of all participants. I began with explaining my critical moment to Don Julio, and the impact that Richard's illness and death had on my current interest in both education and ecojustice. While we had met during my time in Tierra Blanca in 2007, I did have to remind Don Julio who I was and who I worked with during my time in the area. After establishing that baseline, I brought up my desire to understand what the current outreach and education goals of the Parish Emergency Fund were, and how the context of the region had changed since my time there. Don Julio is a charismatic speaker and incredibly knowledgeable on the specific health concerns of his parish. At my request, he began by explaining more about the current theories on why kidney disease and failure disproportionately impacts the men and women in the parish.

In speaking about the outreach difficulties in the zone, it is helpful to understand the size of the area the parish covers. Unlike Catholic parishes in the United States, the parish boundaries in El Salvador cover a huge geographical area, stretching from the Lempa River to the northwest, down to the Pacific Coast and over 20 kilometers east along the country's main highway towards the second largest town in the department. The entire region is known as *Bajo Lempa* and the 360 sq km area of the parish was served by two incredibly dedicated but overworked priests, and a team of religious sisters, organizers, and activists primarily based in Tierra Blanca.

The area is also a geographical mix, ranging from the mangrove trees around the Bay of Jiquilisco to the more arid bluffs overlooking the Lempa River. Much of the remaining area has been converted into farmland, which is an ecological disaster on many levels. Not only are the pesticides used in the local agriculture incredibly harmful to native plants, wild and domesticated animals, and people; the depletion of the soil and the increasingly harsh rainy seasons have led to frequent catastrophic flooding resulting in the loss of homes, crops, and livestock. Climate change has also led to an increase in hurricane strengths, frequency of earthquakes, and inconsistent rain cycles, leading to additional losses.

When considering what might be the root causes of the high rate of kidney failure in this area, there are two more important forces to keep in mind- poverty and the inaccessibility of healthy food and clean water. While most people born in El Salvador enjoy some immunity from the effects of contaminated water, foreigners moving to the rural areas frequently develop intestinal parasites and other gastrointestinal problems. Whenever possible, even native Salvadorans drink purified water; but only when they can afford it.

In areas like *Bajo Lempa* close to the river that runs through the country down to the Bay of Jiquilisco, children learn from a young age that the accessible water is seldom uncontaminated, and by the time they begin joining their parents in the fields they are often conditioned to go without adequate water. Frequent dehydration combined with the fact that sodas and alcohol are usually cheaper than purified water leads to an increase in one of the two

most common types of kidney disease in the country. Don Julio points out that this type of kidney failure is often caused by other health issues, such as diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol. He further posited that decreasing unhealthy food intake would lower the cases of kidney failure in the parish, but also admits that this is easier said than done.

Though the phenomenon of food deserts is more studied in the United States, the lack of access to healthy foods can be a huge problem in the small towns in the rural areas of El Salvador as well. When I lived in Tierra Blanca, the closest grocery store was 20 kilometers away. There were smaller stores in the town of course, but access to fresh eggs, dairy, meats and produce fluctuated wildly from week to week. Many of the families I knew consumed a mostly processed and shelf-stable food based diet that was high in salt, fat, and sugar. In many ways, this dependence on “junk” food stems from the legacy of colonialism and of replacing the typical indigenous dietary staples that were cultivated pre-conquista with more profitable crops such as coffee, sugar, and indigo. This destabilization of an entire region’s diet has had a negative effect on health outcomes ever since, as well as creating dependence on an international trade economy to access the fundamental nutritional elements necessary for a balanced diet This has led to health issues quite similar to what has been uncovered in the research on the indigenous peoples of North America and the impacts of radically altering the diet of an entire civilization in the name of increased profit.

One of the ways Don Julio has been attempting to counter this harmful history is through educational programming for adults as to which foods are most nutritionally beneficial to prevent common health problems that can usually be attributed to poor diet. While educating adults is important, he also expressed to me a desire for a healthy food curriculum that could be implemented in schools starting as early as kindergarten. After the end of WWII in 1945, most developed countries began to implement nutrition education programs in schools. Interestingly enough, these programs were seldom shared with educators in countries whose traditional diets were disrupted by the imperialist conquest of empires like England, Spain, France, and Portugal; all countries now considered “developed” without too much interrogation as to how the wealth used to develop them was extracted from their conquered territories.

As of right now, the elementary school curriculum in El Salvador has no educational content regarding the benefits of a nutritionally-balanced diet. While my generation in the United States grew up with the food pyramid and recommended daily percentages, these concepts are still not explicitly taught to Salvadoran students at all. Don Julio hopes that by educating parents on how to provide balanced nutrition for their children, there will eventually be a reduction in cases of child and young adult kidney failure. For now though, there is a more pressing issue facing many Salvadoran communities: poverty, exploitation, and greed.

For most parishioners in *Bajo Lempa,* the result of untreated early-stage kidney disease is ultimately dialysis. Originally, community members needing dialysis were transported to a dialysis center in the national capital of San Salvador about a 90 kilometer drive each way. The treatments and transportation remained prohibitively expensive, especially for agricultural workers who are at a greater risk of developing kidney disease due to pesticide exposure and improper hydration. Many of the dialysis patients had been the primary breadwinners for their

families and were now no longer able to work. The decision for them then became either continue to receive dialysis and drain what little income the family is able to scrape together, or refuse treatment and suffer a slow and painful death. Even if the patients opt for dialysis, it is only a treatment. Kidney failure is still a death sentence for regular Salvadorans.

At some point in the past several years, an enterprising doctor opened up a private dialysis center in Jiquilisco, only 20 kilometers away from Tierra Blanca. The center has 40 machines, making it almost quadruple the size of the closest hospital offering dialysis. While the hospital can see 45 patients a day, this new private clinic can see 120 patients a day. While the Parish Emergency fund is now saving money on transportation up to the capital, Don Julio is still unhappy. “These doctors see this disease as a money-maker.” He told me. “It’s more profitable to treat the symptoms rather than work for a cure.” It is enraging to think that a community with such a high occurrence of dialysis patients, including children still in grade school, is being exploited once again by the wealthy. Dialysis, the treatment for a condition whose cause can be traced back to centuries of exploitation and neglect, has become yet another way to profit from the misery of the poor.

Despite all of this, Don Julio remains optimistic. Through the support of international donors in the United States and Belgium (where one of the most beloved priests in Tierra Blanca grew up), the campaign to increase awareness of kidney disease risk factors and ways to prevent its progression continues going strong. Organizers affiliated with the Catholic church sponsor prevention focused education workshops, organize blood donation drives, and raise money for ongoing dialysis treatment. Students, armed with smartphones and video sharing, are taking up the fight for justice- climate and otherwise, and are doing so in ways that reach more people than ever before. The way to a more equitable and just future for this beleaguered community lies in education. Thanks to the advances in technology over the past 15 years since my initial visit to Tierra Blanca, there are more ways to disseminate this life saving information to more and more people every day.

Conclusion

Even as the political situation in El Salvador becomes turbulent once again and the quality of government-funded education continues to decline, there is hope for the future. While the government in El Salvador destabilizes, there are people like my friends in Tierra Blanca who are documenting human rights violations, making videos and singing songs that bring their story to the global stage. Digital learning platforms like Khan Academy, YouTube, and even TikTok means that more information than ever before is available to anyone with an internet connection. While the internet is still a place where billionaires get richer and continue to use their power to pit the marginalized of the world against each other over the scraps as the world burns, it is also a place where a scared teenager in El Salvador can watch a silly little TikTok video about climate activism or proper nutrition and go to bed a little more informed than they were when the day started. It is a place that fosters connection between a shy nineteen year old who barely spoke Spanish and had their heart broken by the death of a boy named Richard,

and a greater community of educators, researchers and content creators; and together decide to work together to do something about it.

I firmly believe that a more equitable future will not be brought about by sweeping global policy change- or at least not only by that. I have to believe that education is part of the solution, that a humanity that knows better is able to do better. My hope for the future relies on these small microtransactions of knowledge, building upon each other over and over until the voiceless once again find their voice. That the attempts of a sleep-deprived doctoral student and their connections to a small group of activists and educators in a different hemisphere can support each other and, like ripples on a pond, one day translate into a more just future for all of us.

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