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Critical environmental justice in contemporary scholarship and movements: consensus and plurality of the discourse

David Schlosberg[a], Lauren Rickards[b], Rebecca Pearse[c], Hannah Della Bosca[a] and Oli Moraes[d]

[a]Sydney Environment Institute, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia; [b]La Trobe Climate Adaptation Lab, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia; [c]Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia; [d]Climates, Australia

ABSTRACT

Critical environmental justice (EJ) scholars, focused on the role of race, gender, capital, colonization, and power as key to environmental injustice, argue that EJ thinking and practice should move past the traditional focus on liberal and state-based remedies. There are many scholarly accounts of critical EJ, but no systematic examinations of such views in practice. This paper reports on a survey of the meanings of EJ circulating among activists and scholars globally. Using Q method, we found strong agreement with this more critical framing of EJ – representing an important development of EJ as a global discourse. At the same time, we found important differences in terms of knowledge and standpoints, participation, the liberal state, EJ praxis, and the politics of disruption. We argue that this heterogeneity of perspectives, within a generally critical approach, reflects the context-specificity, evolution and expanding reach of EJ and reflects the field's overarching ethos of plurality.

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Introduction

Environmental injustice is escalating, and the proliferating set of global and local problems, combined with a new determination to address long-standing wrongs, is putting environmental justice (EJ) theory and practice under stress. On any given day, the media provides examples of environmental injustices around the world, from lead poisoning of children in the US, fish kills along the Darling River in Australia,

CONTACT David Schlosberg david.schlosberg@sydney.edu.au
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displacement due to climate-induced disasters, the ongoing clearing of the Amazon, or coal, oil and gas production threatening human and nonhuman life globally. At multiple scales, the spatial and temporal distribution of environmental risks and benefits is deeply unequal and is exacerbated by continued industrialisation and climate change. This situation is intensifying as elites draw on financial and other resources to consolidate their advantage and resilience, while leaving others especially vulnerable (Curran 2018, Thomas 2024).

Theory and practice for EJ is at something of an epistemic and political crossroads. For some time, the field has been expanding in its practical political and socio-ecological content beyond liberal frameworks concerned with inequitable distribution of environmental harms and risks (Schlosberg 2007, 2013). As new sites, scales and agents in EJ struggles have emerged, scholars and activists have been reflecting on the dynamics and complexities of local and global changes underway. Many have emphasised EJ's multiple dimensions in terms of policy and political barriers (Harrison 2015, 2017), the diverse geographies and spatialities at work (Walker 2009), the need to address anthropocentrism (Celermajer *et al.* 2021), and the crucial impact of colonialism (Sultana 2022b). At the same time, a shared understanding of and approach to EJ offers political, intellectual and social benefits. Means of collective resistance, for instance, rely on an appreciation of the systemic challenges and forms of power that obstruct EJ. Many scholars and activists have called for a critical EJ agenda that weaves together critiques of historical-structural power (notably capital, race, gender) with commitments to transformative politics (Pellow 2018, Sultana 2022a). While such an agenda promises important improvements on multiple fronts, any unitary agenda risks advancing a homogenising approach that inadvertently closes off alternatives. EJ faces an intersecting/intersectional challenge, including the tension between the general and the particular, and shared and diverse perspectives. Deliberately cultivating plurality for ethical, analytical, and instrumental reasons is key (Nightingale 2015).

In this paper, we engage with this tension and offer a systematic and pluralistic overview of the meanings of EJ in contemporary academic and movement spheres. We report on an interpretive study that aims to examine the directions and contemporary meanings of EJ for practitioners and scholars. We find a community that is both critical and diverse, even as it moves beyond an earlier EJ primarily focused on state-based remedies. In subsequent sections, we provide a brief review of EJ and an introduction to the Q method used to interpret EJ knowledge before outlining the nature of critical EJ consensus and differences in critical emphasis among practitioners and scholars in the field.

Environmental justice in theory and practice

EJ scholarship has always been a heterogeneous field of endeavour, in part because it is a dialogue of theory and practice across multiple types of impacted communities. Since its emergence in the United States in the 1980s, EJ research and action has proliferated into multiple arenas of research and collective action. While the concept of EJ emerged to highlight the correlation of the maldistribution of environmental bads with race and social disadvantage in the US (Bullard 1990), EJ analysis has since expanded to examine a wider array of environmental bads, differential access to environmental goods, and various questions of disadvantage, recognition, and political participation in an increasing number of countries (Walker 2011, Schlosberg 2013). Scholars and activists across the global south have long used the concept and are finally getting more attention in efforts to ground the discourse in the experiences of a broader range of affected communities (Sultana 2019, 2022a). EJ is now a diverse multi-disciplinary field addressing some of the most difficult structural challenges for social movements today, engaging with work on climate justice, energy justice, food justice, and just transition and adaptation, to name a few.

The idea of EJ, however, faces two major stresses at the intersection of theory and practice. First, widening practical application of EJ by movements and researchers alike is expanding its theoretical scope, meanings, and interplay with different goals, leading to tensions such as that between climate justice and climate action frames (Pearse 2010). This raises the question: what does EJ mean conceptually when used in so many ways and contexts? Secondly, EJ is a practical challenge, drawing from and putting ideas into social movement practice and policy outcomes. This leads to a constant process of experimentation and political struggle, where no single recipe is possible, adding to the proliferation of EJ's meanings, foci, and actions.

While EJ literature works at the nexus of theory and practice, the methods of analysis and interpretation prevalent in the field belie a tendency to split the two elements of EJ praxis. On the one hand, detailed empirical analyses, favouring local and national case study research, specify environmental injustices and present EJ as a common-sense lens. On the other hand, EJ theorising has long had pluralist roots, and the general theoretical debates about the meaning of EJ rightly focus on the ongoing violence of capitalist and colonial institutions (Pellow 2022, Sultana 2022b), as well as the social and institutional forms that race, gender and capital take in matters of environmental injustice (Pulido 2017, Sze 2018).

Rather than default into either case study or general theory logics, we propose that systematic analyses of what concepts are actually circulating about EJ in practice – and how they work, why, and to what effect – could help refresh academic and political debate about what is to be done in the

name of EJ. Picking up on complexities and structural dynamics driving environmental injustice worldwide, plus calls for both critical and grounded approaches to EJ theory, we offer a systematic discourse analysis of the field as an important first step in gauging the meaning of EJ in contemporary praxis. Our aim in this paper is to review current discourses of EJ in both the academic and activist spheres. By examining EJ's complex constructions, we provide a map of contemporary EJ discourse in both the academic and activist spheres, to illuminate points of commonality and difference, and explore opportunities for cooperation, coordination, and real-world change.

Q methodology

The primary method used in this research was Q, a quantitative method with qualitative aspects that systematically maps people's perspectives of distinct discourses. Q provides a valuable link between an interpretivist epistemology (focused on individuals' perceptions) and a constructivist epistemology (focused on collective discourses). It draws qualitative discourse analysis and interview data together with quantitative statistical analysis to help identify relational patterns in individual priorities, offering a 'bridge between positivist and post-positivist approaches to policy analysis' (Ellis *et al.* 2007, p. 517).

Q is becoming well established in political science, human geography, and political ecology as a valuable way to understand the complexity of environmental and social conflicts. It involves surveying public discourse for commonly held viewpoints and presenting a representative sample (a 'concourse') to participants, who rank them on a standardised grid, called a Q sort. Interviews are conducted with participants to understand their ranking and the Q sorts are compared using factor analysis to identify subtle patterns within the broader participant group. From the factor analysis and interview responses, researchers characterise distinct types of response within the group, called a factor. Addams and Proops (2000) suggest that Q is suited to complex social and environmental issues because it enables researchers to understand similarities and differences in participant views, develop a nuanced understanding of the topic as a whole, and potentially identify actionable policy pathways.

Q is useful for capturing the diversity of perspectives in the EJ community. First, it displaces a focus on privileged individuals and pre-existing socio-demographic groups with an alternative focus on emergent, inter-related social groupings (Duenckmann 2010). By identifying patterns across individual responses and clustering them by similarity and demographics, it reveals both consensus and differences in participants' viewpoints and potentially illuminates unexpected alliances. Second, Q requires participants to reflect on their own priorities, allowing researchers to identify granular

differences between EJ perspectives, tease out tensions, and offering insights to participants.

Q is a complex, multistep method that generates distinct forms of data at every stage.[1] We now outline our use of the methodology.

Concourse and Q-set development

For the concourse development, we searched academic sources (journal articles and book chapters) and activist sources (grey literature published via organisational websites and media articles) published between 2018 and 2020. We identified Google and Google Scholar as the most appropriate databases and ran Boolean queries for nine global regions to systematically include perspectives from areas with less prominent EJ coverage.[2] Relevant articles were selected from the top twenty results for each search, resulting in a database with 639 statements from 139 activist sources, and 711 statements from 153 academic sources.

The statements were iteratively coded by content, category, and theme consistent with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014). This resulted in 73 coding categories, illustrating the vast breadth of meanings, foci, and interpretations in the literature. To refine this into a representative set, a two-step strategy was implemented, involving sub-categorisation and identification of top categories for both academic and public sphere, with the most prominent topics informing final statement selection (see Figure 1). A final set of 36 statements was identified, edited for clarity, and in some cases modified into the negative (see Appendix 1).[3]

	Public Meaning statements (394)	Percentage	Refs	Academic Meaning statements (868)	Percentage	Refs
1	Race	14.21%	56	Plurality of meanings	7.26%	63
2	Equity/inequity	8.12%	32	Collective action	5.65%	49
3	Collective action Waste/pollution	6.85%	27	Indigenous Intersecting	4.95%	43
4	Health	5.08%	20	Race	4.38%	38
5	Indigenous	4.31%	17	Terminology	3.92%	34
6	Gender/sexuality	3.05%	12	Community	3.57%	31
7	Class Plurality of meanings	2.79%	11	Capitalism Scale	3%	26
8	Disasters Policy Poverty	2.54%	10	Policy and politics	2.76%	24

Figure 1. Meaning statement top categories (academic and public sphere). 'Refs' is the number of references or times statements were coded at a particular category.

Participant selection and Q-sorts

A key element of Q research is participant selection due to the requirement to include as diverse and comprehensive a range of viewpoints as possible. While complete representation was clearly impossible given the global breadth and scope of our research agenda, we used two participant selection parameters to increase diversity and reduce our own selection biases. First, we invited both activist and academic participants explicitly working under the banner of EJ, as it would not be possible to map the discourse of EJ without engagement of both scholarly and activist communities. As outlined below, our findings illustrate some specific overlaps and differences between them.

Second, we tried to avoid reliance on our existing academic or activist networks by focusing on participants unknown to the research team, reaching out to international grassroots climate and community activists and identifying prospective participants only through our key word search of activist and academic EJ sources in each global region. Activist participants tended to be the subject of articles about their organisation, experiences, or activities, while academic participants tended to be paper authors.

Our research design had initially involved attending EJ conferences and events to conduct Q workshops; however, due to COVID-19, we redesigned the study for entirely remote participant engagement. This ultimately benefited our research as it allowed us to geographically expand and diversify our participant sample. The Q sort was completed by participants from twelve countries working in areas of climate, energy, food, and land rights at various scales, including grass roots activists, NGO staff, policy negotiators, and academics.[4]

Participants were sent a personalised link to the study and asked to rank-sort the set of 36 statements from most agree to most disagree in a forced standard bell curve (see Figure 2). The process took approximately 30

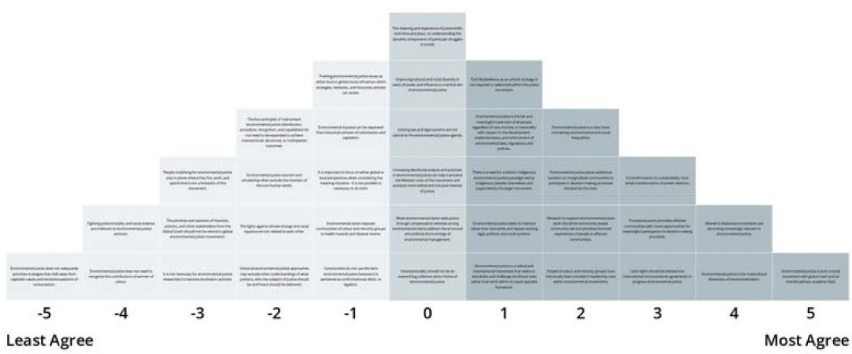

Figure 2. Completed Q sort grid example.

minutes to complete. Participants were also asked to complete a demographic survey and a brief exit survey, including whether they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Analysis and interviews

Once all Q-sorts were submitted, we conducted a factor analysis of participant responses using the purpose-built factor analysis tools in our platform.[5] The purpose of factor analysis is to simplify relational trends in data by identifying statements that participants sorted similarly and grouping individuals who shared distinct types of responses (see Appendix 2). Nineteen of the 24 participant responses were characterised within four distinct types of response. The responses of 5 participants sat evenly between two or more factors. We conducted a basic analysis of the raw Q-sort responses in order to include all participants in our consensus analysis.[6]

Q interviews are generally conducted immediately following participant sorting; however, we were constrained by the logistics of conducting the research remotely during COVID and scheduling interviews across time zones. We conducted follow-up interviews online with nine participants to gather feedback on their Q-sort experience, share our preliminary findings, and gather feedback on areas that rang true or which needed refining. We also ran two participant workshops to enable group reflection and discussion. The characterisation of the factors, presented below, involved ongoing engagement with participants, within the team, and in consideration of the academic and activist literatures surveyed in the first part of the research.

Critical environmental justice as a consensus discourse

Our results indicate a high degree of agreement within the EJ movement, despite its growing diversity. Identified consensus statements (those shared by a high proportion of the group) suggest that EJ activists and scholars from disparate geographic, sectoral, and institutional settings are connected by a shared and strong consensus on issues of inclusion around issues such as power, intersectionality, contextual plurality, recognition, and inclusion (Appendix 2). This indicates broad endorsement within EJ communities of scholars and activists for a critical approach to EJ of the sort advocated by scholars such as Pellow (2018, 2005), Pulido and De Lara (2018), and Sultana (2022b, 2022b), rather than the standard framework of injustices (distribution, recognition, participation) or liberal and state-based conceptions of injustice. We see this convergence on a critical approach as an important development in the history of EJ as a global discourse.

Using standard Q-method analysis, it was clear that most participant responses fell into this dominant discourse, which accounted for over 50%

of the variance in the data. The two statements that received the highest level of positive consensus were 'A transformation to sustainability must entail transformation of power relations' (Temper *et al.* 2018, p. 749) and 'Increasing decolonial analysis and practices in environmental justice can help transcend the Western roots of the movement and produce more radical and inclusive theories of justice' (Temper 2019, p. 94). Other consensus statements recognise the need to connect EJ to the historical contexts of colonisation and capitalism (from Spencer *et al.* 2020) and the need for EJ to recognise the contributions of women of colour (from Hoover 2018).

Other statements highly ranked by the whole group emphasise the need to more actively recognising the vital contributions of BIPOC activists, particularly women, at every scale (Hoover 2018, Szedlacsek 2020), and to centre the opinions and priorities of activists and scholars from the Global South in global EJ theorising and action (Menton *et al.* 2020). Participants prioritised statements that call for greater recognition of all marginalised perspectives of exclusion or oppression, particularly for those fighting state-sponsored violence. There was also consensus around the need to recognise perspectives at different scales simultaneously in order to relate local experiences to global perspectives of justice, and to support community-based and community-led EJ, given how place dynamics shape justice situations. The most highly ranked consensus statements were ambitious and directive, proposing improvements and paths for future EJ research and action.

This set of consensus statements strongly reflects a critical EJ approach. As Pellow (2018, p. 14) has explained, critical EJ studies address a number of 'limitations and tensions' in earlier iterations of EJ theory. These include:

(1) A focus on social categories of difference (race, class, gender), and, crucially, on their intersectionality in the study of disadvantage and injustice;
(2) Examining the causes, impacts, and responses to environmental injustice at multiple scales;
(3) Acknowledging and addressing the entrenched and embedded nature of power, including state power;
(4) Critiquing the perceived *expendability* of both humans and nonhumans in the eyes of capital.

As Pellow argues, the intersectional approach of critical EJ studies speaks to the ways in which various social categories of difference work to place particular bodies at risk of exclusion, marginalization, erasure, discrimination, violence, and othering. Much of this academic articulation of critical EJ is informed by Black scholarship, and specifically Black ecologies and ecofeminisms (Ducre 2018). A critical EJ

approach also encompasses a specific critique of colonialism and its ongoing impacts, as well as a decolonial approach to justice itself (Sultana 2022a).

In the interviews and workshops, participants similarly focused strongly on issues of identity – race, gender, class (to a lesser degree) and Indigeneity – along with critiques of power, particularly the forms that capital and corporations take in settler colonial and post-colonial nations of the South. The results reinforce the sense that to address the ongoing harms of colonialism and capitalism, a fundamental transformation of power relations is needed, and that this needs to be implemented not only through EJ campaigns, or within government institutions, legal systems, corporations and communities, but also within EJ movements themselves. Overall, our findings empirically endorse Faber *et al.* (2021, p. 4) general claim that 'EJ movements are adopting more critical frames as the limitations of "liberalist" EJ strategies become evident'.

The plurality of critical EJ

This strong consensus was initially surprising, given we had identified significant diversity in the collection of statements, in terms of the breadth of perspectives and understandings of what EJ means to scholars and activists (see Figure 1). However, within this overarching critical EJ framing, we also found some subtle but key differences in emphasis. This illustrates that the overarching, critical EJ discourse is not singular and universalising but is instead itself a pluralist discourse, spawning a number of critical perspectives.

To investigate finer-grained differences across our respondents, we further explored similarities and differences between our participant responses using a factor rotation (common to Q methodology) to enable a deeper comparison. Below we outline and describe four distinct, yet overlapping, EJ discourses that emerged from this analysis (see Figure 3). These are all variations on the critical EJ theme, yet each identifies distinct issues and strategies as the most significant. In naming each, we have drawn on the general characteristics of the statements prioritised by participants.

These four discourses of critical EJ illustrate that different communities of EJ academics and activists emphasise different elements of a critical approach. Importantly, however, these discourses are analytical constructs and, while most of our participants clearly aligned with one discourse, some participants aligned strongly with more than one and so sat at the intersections (Figure 4).

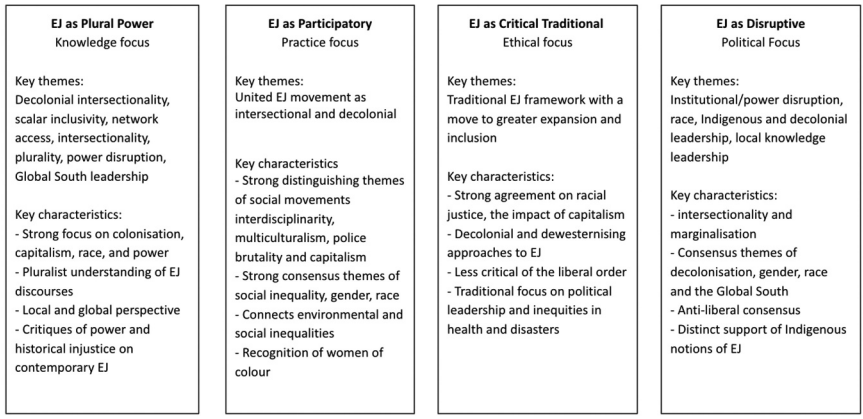

Figure 3. Discourses of critical EJ.

Plurality of power (knowledge focus)

The first discourse defines the meaning of critical EJ in terms of the specific context, knowledges and experiences of particular communities. It asserts that diverse experiences require diverse conceptions or foci of justice and a sharing of power. Here, the emphasis is on the need for theorists and activists to understand the dynamics of particular struggles (Zeitoun *et al.* 2019) including how any particular situation is influenced by both local and/or broader powers. Such power, in turn, shapes which strategies, networks, and resources activists can access (Stoddart *et al.* 2018).

This endorsement of a pluralistic approach is illustrated by strong agreement with the statement that 'Universal environmental justice approaches may exclude other understandings of what justice is, who the subjects of justice should be and how it should be delivered' and strong disagreement with 'It is important to focus on either global or local perspectives when considering the meaning of justice – it is not possible or necessary to do both'. These statements, modified from Temper (2019) and Nesmith *et al.* (2020) respectively, illustrate the longstanding pluralist position in the academic EJ community on the acceptance of multiplicity of conceptions of justice at play in the movement.

The majority of statements prioritised in this approach were of academic origin, and the perspective was held by academic and academic-activist participants mainly from the global North, including the Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States, and Australia. This particular group's emphasis on plural knowledges reinforces our findings during the concourse development, in which the largest category of academic statements was on the plurality of meanings.

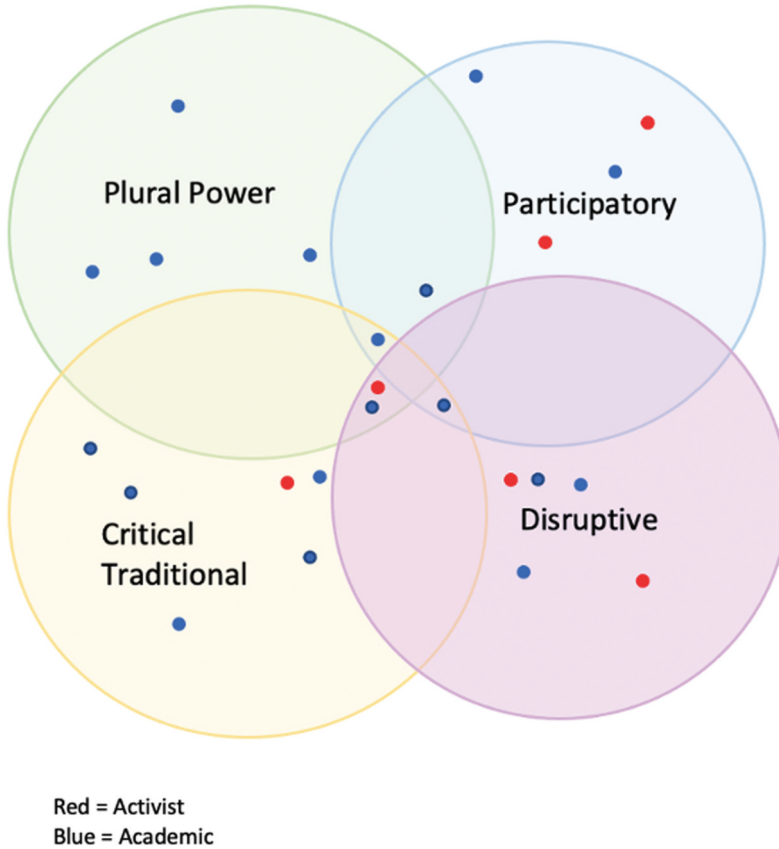

Figure 4. Overlapping approaches to critical EJ.

Follow-up interviews illustrated how this pluralist understanding was connected to an expanded and more critical conception of EJ. One academic participant from North America who was primarily aligned with this approach spoke about the historical lack of recognition for Indigenous knowledges in the US, stating that:

> . . .it's the Supreme Court that hands down decisions that limit the meanings of things, especially around sacred site issues . . . . I think that environmental justice as a concept needs to be expanded to incorporate those kinds of places because of the lack of legal protections in other realms of life in the US. (Interviewee 1)

An academic participant from South America who had broad alignment with this approach stated that:

> My experience with environmental justice . . . [comes] from the perspective of this global view . . . . So while I appreciate the roots of the movement in North America,

> I have seen how this claim appears more and more in conflicts over resource extraction and waste in the Global South . . . . I invite [students] to say, 'what are the notions of justice in this particular part of the world that you are looking at? That may bring you something different from what we know to be environmental justice' . . . . I think this is one of the reasons why I believe we have to be open to this. . . It's not consistent with [historical/Western] perspectives at all. (Interviewee 2)

This reflection points to some of the epistemic justice tensions within EJ, and illustrates a particular knowledge-based element of critical environmental justice.

Participatory (practice focus)

The second understanding of a critical approach to EJ is characterised by an emphasis on social movement activism and campaign involvement, the lived practice of such activism, and the recognition and protection of those undertaking action. Participants who align with this discourse represented a combination of academics and activists from, or working in, the Global South, including Togo, Brazil, Uganda, and Peru. The statements prioritised in this approach came from an even mix of activist and academic sources.

In this approach, the distinguishing statement that participants most agreed with was that 'Environmental justice is both a social movement with global reach and an interdisciplinary academic field' (Ferdinand and Gioielli n.d..), emphasising the importance of movements to meaning making. Other strongly agreed statements focused on the importance of women's resistance movements in EJ (Szedlacsek 2020), of procedural justice providing affected communities with more opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making processes (Waldron 2018), and of EJ research that is community-based, community-led and which prioritises the lived experiences of people in affected communities (Raphael 2019). Participants also strongly desired a notion of EJ that shifts away from capitalist values and extractive consumption (Kojola and Pellow 2020).

The most contested statements were 'Fighting police brutality and racial violence are irrelevant to environmental justice activism' (modified from Cohen *et al.* 2020) and 'Environmental justice does not need to recognise the contributions of women of colour' (modified from Hoover 2022). Other statements emphasised the need for scholars to become engaged in activism (Smith and Patterson 2018), for the priorities of theorists, activists and other stakeholders from the Global South to guide the global justice agenda (Menton *et al.* 2020), and the connection between climate change and racial injustice (Gardiner 2020). Again, the overall focus was on the recognition and contributions of community participation and activism.

Interviews illustrated this emphasis on direct and practical action in multiple ways. One activist participant from Uganda who was primarily aligned with this approach stated:

> Everybody has dignity. So if you live in an area it is normal that you try to protect your environment, [rather] than to get out. If I have something to say, that would be - concerning our different governments - 'be more practical than theoretical'. (Interviewee 3)

Participants also strongly related practical action to the enactment of power transformation. One academic participant from Brazil explained:

> We're going to see a lot of selling of solutions, but solutions for who? Who are going to benefit from those solutions? We have seen the same here in Brazil for, for example [with] nature-based solutions. That's a positive agenda, right? Nature based solution. But here in Brazil ... [these solutions] are not for everybody, but just for a small group of people that just reinforce and bring inequality. (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees also noted the work that needed to be done in the Global South on the broad inclusion of BIPOC activists within the EJ movement. Overall, the focus of this critical approach was on EJ as a movement, and the recognition of the participation and practices of diverse activists in EJ struggles.

Critical traditional (ethical focus)

Another discourse of EJ found in our survey is one that we see as critical, but still traditional in many senses. This approach prioritises the historical characteristics of EJ, particularly the exposure of marginalised communities to health hazards and harm, and racial and gender equity within movements. It also has an emphasis on expanding EJ notions beyond the traditional framework of justice used by northern academics, particularly through decolonial analysis and practice. While that represents a critical EJ approach, there was also alignment with a classic focus on appeals to existing liberal legal systems – the only group where such a focus was emphasised.

The strongest agreement among participants who aligned with this approach was for the statement 'Environmental racism exposes communities of colour and minority groups to health hazards and disaster events' (combined and modified from Beech 2020, Gardiner 2020), followed by 'Increasing decolonial analysis and practices in environmental justice can help transcend the Western roots of the movement and produce more radical and inclusive theories of justice' (modified from Temper 2019). The strongest disagreement was around 'Environmental injustice can be separated from historical contexts of colonisation and capitalism' (modified from Spencer *et al.* 2020), and a range of statements that disagreed that climate

and racial injustice could be separated (modified from Gardiner 2020), that minority groups have historically been included in EJ leadership roles (modified from Dlott 2020), and that the movement does not need to recognise the contributions of women of colour (modified from Hoover 2018). All but the first statement are clearly aligned with a critical EJ approach.

And yet, within this critical approach, the statement that most clearly distinguishes this discourse from the others was 'Environmental justice is the fair and meaningful treatment of all people, regardless of race, income, or nationality with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies' (EPA, 2020 in RISA 2020). The presence of this historically standard definition of EJ, and legal remedies, reflects support of a more traditional understanding of EJ as central for these participants. However, there was also general disagreement of the idea that 'The four principles of mainstream environmental justice (distribution, procedure, recognition, and capabilities) do not need to be expanded to achieve intersectional, decolonial, or multispecies outcomes' (modified from Menton *et al.* 2020). Taken together, these statements reflect the priorities of participants with a strong alignment to traditional notions of justice and the liberal state, as well as a critical shift towards issues central to a critical EJ approach.

Primary alignment to this approach came from academics from Europe, Australia, and Canada, who prioritised statements originating in both the academic and activist literatures. We posit that this more academic audience remains more aligned with an approach that highlights the policy and regulatory focus given a lack of experience on the ground with the corruption and failures of such an approach relative to activists. That said, while participant statements in our follow-up interviews reflected a focus on traditional concepts of inequality in the face of harm, they also move beyond a static or rigid understanding of who EJ applies to and in what contexts. For some participants, this translated to a focus on the intersectional contexts and underlying systems of injustice.

Nevertheless, the tension between traditional and more critical approaches is palpable, as we heard in some interviews:

> There are many different ways we could frame what the problem is that we're faced with. But effectively, in my view, it all comes back to the mode of production in which we find ourselves on a global scale. And I think a lot of environmental justice literature bases itself in socio-legal positioning. It places itself in cultural positioning. And even some of the really good stuff that's coming out from Indigenous scholars, for example, very often comes back to thinking about culture and thinking about sovereignty in ways which I suppose are for me not necessarily aligned to my underlying … understanding of how things work in the world, which very much comes back to capitalist exploitation, which is manifest in the exploitation of people and planet. (Interviewee 5)

This boundary-work between critical and traditional EJ concerns was also reflected in participant interviews that focused on the way that existing systems are failing particular communities, such as disabled persons, and the action required to address them. Some participants emphasised the need to open traditional EJ discourse to broader applications and reorder EJ relationships with liberal systems. For practitioners working at these edges of critical EJ, the language of rights remains important.

This invites reflection on the role of the state as a site of resistance or negotiation. Academic participants from Canada, France, and Australia tended to discuss state institutions as an unavoidable feature of EJ strategies, both as a tool for improved outcomes and as a place of targeted resistance. In many of our interviews, how the state was figured oscillated between being a potential vehicle for, versus being a roadblock to, EJ. No participant was naïve about the liberal state, with many arguing that its processes, policies, and protections cannot be trusted. For some, the contradictions justified a disengagement and resistance to the state in favour of prefigurative politics.

> [F]or a long time there was a sort of common consensus on, at least we agree that the state is trustworthy for some things. We can still rely on it for some things. We think we can still use it. Right. But then you see this new sort of much more radical movement . . . something there that is clearly much closer to that sort of anti-liberal, much more of a disruptive movement, but not disruptive as in we have to dismantle the state. It's more of a we have to disengage completely. We have to not engage with the state at all and create something else. (Interviewee 7)

Such positions illustrate the shift from a more traditional EJ approach – which included engaging the state on policy, regulation, and law to try to address injustice – to a more critical approach. The fact that we saw so little engagement with these traditional liberal, state-focused tactics or approaches indicates how widely accepted a critical EJ discourse has become across the EJ community. That said, our study took place before the Biden administration in the US reached out to the EJ community and positioned some critical EJ scholars and activists in policy and advisory roles (for example, in the White House EJ Advisory Council), which may reinvigorate interest in such liberal approaches.

Disruptive (political focus)

The final approach we found is more specifically focused on the kind of disruption noted by the interviewee above. This approach is characterised by an explicit challenge to existing systems, particularly those of the liberal state. Like other approaches, there was very strong agreement that the priorities and opinions of theorists, activists, and other stakeholders from the Global

South should be central to global EJ movements (Menton *et al.* 2020). There is also support for community based and led research (Raphael 2019), the role of women of colour in the movement (Hoover 2018), and insistence on an expanded application of the four principles of mainstream EJ (Menton *et al.* 2020).

But the distinguishing statement in this discourse that participants most agreed with was that 'Environmental justice is a radical and intersectional movement that seeks to destabilise and challenge the liberal state rather than work within its racial capitalist framework' (Pulido and De Lara 2018). Further, and clearly not coincidentally, this was the only approach where support for a distinct Indigenous notion of EJ was strongly ranked, with participants agreeing that 'There is a need for a distinct Indigenous environmental justice paradigm led by Indigenous peoples themselves and supported by the larger movement' (McGregor 2018). The emphasis on these statements points to a more radical concept of EJ in which the liberal state is both decentred and disrupted as a site of authority, and alternatives are developed.

A broadly diverse set of participants articulated this particular approach – a combination of academics and activists from north and south: Australia, Ecuador, United States, Colombia, and South Africa. The prioritised statements all came from academic sources.

One academic participant from South America who aligned significantly with this approach reinforced a more radical concept of EJ being adopted by activists in their research, one focused not simply on limiting damage but on disrupting systems and instilling broad change. Another participant who strongly aligned with this approach reiterated the need for significant change, as opposed to continuing to attempt to work within liberal systems. As they argued:

> I would probably fall more into the critical side - that there needs to be some pretty big changes in order for [justice] to become possible from a systems perspective. I find it really hard to speak in a general, global sense, but I think the systems have not served the marginalised well [and] there needs to be major revisiting of how … our political systems are institutionalised. (Interviewee 8)

Another aspect of this politically focused EJ discourse was an especially strong focus on the need to genuinely include Indigenous peoples and perspectives in governance (Gustafsson and Schilling-Vacaflor 2022). There was attention to such exclusion, and an insistence on decolonising governance. This reality of differential treatment, one interviewee noted, demands a 'call for a much different remedy and framework around environmental justice issues.' (Interviewee 1)

Conclusions and reflections

As noted earlier, we see two very important findings from this global survey. First, it is clear that the critical EJ approach, initially laid out by radical scholars such as Laura Pulido and Devon Pena early in the EJ movement, and more recently by Pulido, David Pellow, Julie Sze, Kyle Whyte, and others, is now advocated for by EJ scholars and activists from around the globe. While EJ was never simply about equity in the distribution of environmental bads, or about the responsibility of liberal states to deliver such equity, the racial justice components existent at the outset of the US movement have clearly become more developed, more applied, and more widespread – at the same time as faith in the state is flagging. EJ, broadly and globally, is now a critical, intersectional, and deconstructive discourse, and our empirical findings reflect its stance and foundation on discourses and experiences of power, race, capital, and colonisation.

At the same time, our second main finding is that this 'critical' EJ approach is not a homogenous, singular one. Each of the different discourses identified in the participant responses has a critical EJ element, but also a particular set of foci. The distinct emphases on the plurality of knowledges, on practice and participation, on the tension between traditional understandings of the state and more critical ones, and on the role of disruption and alternative systems are crucial, if subtle, reflections on the vital diversity and sources of innovation in contemporary EJ. These frames illustrate the malleability and diversity of EJ, and the distinctions they draw must be central to any global reckoning with the reality of environmental injustice. As Hulme (2010) insists, any attempt to map or engage with knowledges at a global scale demands dedicated resistance to the erasure of difference in the pursuit of consensus. As Brown (2016) asserts about 'sustainability,' ambiguity enables concepts to occupy boundaries between and reach across diverse fields. These ideas are particularly crucial in the context of EJ, in which distinct justice claims emerge through specifically situated ecological, institutional, and socio-cultural conditions that morph and change. Plurality is why the complex concept of EJ has been able to find increasing support and engagement across academic and activist sectors alike over the last thirty years.

Within academia and policy, there is a need for greater recognition of the conceptual depth and diversity of EJ. The value of pursuing overarching conceptual frameworks in a field characterised by plurality and change is evident in the ongoing relevance and utility of Schlosberg's (2007) earlier work on equity, recognition, participation, and/or capabilities (see, for example, Ryder and Devine-Wright 2022, Ottinger 2023). But while earlier typologies have clear value, there is a need to increase awareness of the diversity of EJ's meanings, including how communities themselves can be

home to plurivocal and sometimes competing justice claims. Lau, *et al.* (2021) work on community perspectives of EJ, for example, found that existing pre-determined EJ criteria did not capture the 'recursive, fluid nature of local perceptions.' As illustrated by the typology presented here, with its distinction between a focus on knowledges, practices, ethics, and political disruption, contemporary approaches to EJ theory and practice encompass a broad range.

Of equal importance is what we did not find. As noted earlier, there was little relative support expressed for the more mainstream, liberal, and legal approaches to EJ. There was little engagement with statements having to do with the legal system, or issues of fairness and participation – all which would have been more highly ranked in an earlier generation of EJ research. We interpret this as a combined result of the growth of critical EJ as a scholarly field, as well as the relative lack of progress to date on the part of states and legal systems to address ongoing environmental injustices. Further, it is clear from the findings that there was very little support of the extension of EJ concerns beyond the human realm, relative to other priorities. While Indigenous notions of EJ were often positively cited, we saw very little prioritisation of nonhuman concerns (Celermajer *et al.* 2021), or cultural relations with environment (McGregor 2018, Spencer *et al.* 2020, Gustafsson and Schilling-Vacaflor 2022), even in the discourse that most explicitly identified with non-western and Indigenous approaches. This should be surprising, given the fact that ideas about justice to the nonhuman have been key to EJ since the development of the founding principles in 1991, as well as the breadth of scholarship in the field. Unfortunately, this lack of support could reflect the reality that not all of the ideas about critical EJ present in theory are replicated in practice – or, possibly, that a focus on the more-than-human is, in theory and practice, still relatively distinct from, or minimised in, EJ discourses. It also illustrates that while there may be explicit support for Indigenous *movements*, the *philosophies* underpinning such arguments and movements have not been absorbed and/or adopted by the wider movement. This seems a key weakness if the broad pluralism we have uncovered is to be more thoroughly engaged.

Overall, the meaning of the concept of EJ has clearly evolved in the last thirty years. We have attempted to illustrate the diverse discursive landscape with a thoroughly engaged and empirical approach. Encouragingly, the growing complexity of environmental disruptions, and the increasing understanding of the powers and social norms creating environmental injustice – capital, racism, colonialism – has resulted in not only diverse approaches to EJ but a more coherently critical understanding of the term as it is applied in different contexts, scales, and populations. We hope that the clear breadth and plurality of the critiques in the movement lead to the disruptions and repairs necessary to rapidly advance environmental justice.

Notes

1. While the following sections provide a brief methodological overview, a full account of the methodology is beyond the scope of this paper. Socio-environmental researchers new to the method should consult introductory resources for a detailed account of the approach (see Webler *et al.* 2009, Sneegas *et al.* 2021).
2. Boolean search formula: 'environmental justice' AND activism AND [region].
3. Modifying statements into the negative has traditionally been done in Q-sets, however it is now contested as a practice.
4. Participants in this Q-sort were from Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, Netherlands, South Africa, Togo, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
5. One academic Q-sort was excluded due to the high likelihood that the task had been misunderstood. For the curious, we applied the Spearman Correlation to the Q-sorts, followed by Principal Component Analysis factor extraction method. We then applied Varimax factor rotation to four factors.
6. The average, standard deviation and sign/polarity totals of participant scores for each statement were used to inform a preliminary understanding of response trends unrelated to the factor analysis.

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ORCID

David Schlosberg http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3547-919X

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