



# The Visual Politics of Environmental Justice

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**Abstract** This article examines the visual politics at work in website photographs depicting environmental justice issues in the United States. Based on roughly 580 web-published photos collected from environmental justice organizations, the Environmental Protection Agency, the mainstream media, and traditional environmental organizations in the US, this article examines variations in how the subjects of environmental justice are represented and the potential meaning of these representations for viewers. The article identifies three particular photographic genres that serve as landmarks within the environmental justice visual terrain: the fence-line photo, the portrait, and the protest snapshot. Drawing on the literatures of environmental political theory and black visual culture, I position the photos of contemporary environmental justice within the larger discursive, visual, and political contexts that infuse them with meaning. In interpreting these meanings, I argue that a more inclusive socio-ecological politics requires visual strategies that resist racialized ways of seeing while making visible the injustice of disproportionate environmental impacts on low-income communities and people of color.

**Keywords** environmental justice, visual politics, photographs, environmental imaginary

The slow and insidious violence of environmental injustice owes much to the invisibility of its sources.<sup>1</sup> These sources are myriad. They range from the difficulties of discerning toxic agents to the under-resourcing of research that might uncover the pathways from chemical exposure to negative health impacts. Similarly, the marginalization and devaluation of low-income neighborhoods and communities of color contributes to the persistence of violence; as do efforts to maintain, reinforce, and reproduce—or remain indifferent to—the power inequalities that sustain these injustices.<sup>2</sup> The mainstream media contributes to such indifference by rarely reporting the systematic and disproportionate environmental harms experienced by people of color

1. Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

2. Murphy, “Chemical Regimes of Living.”

and economically distressed families.<sup>3</sup> In response, environmental justice (EJ) advocates deploy a host of tools to provide evidence of these injustices including bucket brigades, body burden analyses, community health surveys, interactive maps, and photographs.

Among these, I focus on the use of photography for its profound contribution to shaping modern perceptual capacities, its critical position in the imbrication of environment and race in the United States, its affective power, and its continuing relevance to the EJ movement.<sup>4</sup> Surveying the visual landscape of web-published EJ photos in the US over the summer of 2015, Hannah Stansbury, and Alanna Elder assisted me in creating an archive of roughly 580 photographs collected from a variety of sources throughout: traditional environmental organizations, the national and regional websites of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), mainstream media reporting, and EJ organizations. From this archive, I identified three particular photographic genres that serve as landmarks within the EJ visual territory: the fence-line photo, the portrait, and the protest snapshot. In this essay I draw on the literatures of environmental political theory and black visual culture to position the photographs of contemporary EJ within the larger discursive, visual, and political contexts that infuse them with meaning so as to begin to sketch a visual politics of environmental justice. In interpreting these meanings, I argue that a more inclusive socio-ecological politics requires visual strategies that resist racialized ways of seeing while making visible the injustice of disproportionate environmental impacts on low-income communities and people of color. Constructing such strategies requires negotiating the competing demands of depicting agency and injury, self-possession and the porosity of the human body, disproportionate impact and universal human vulnerability.

### Photography, Race, and the Environment

How we envision the world matters. But sight is a complex process, a product of narrative, technology, agency, and matter. Of this process John Berger writes, “Seeing comes before words . . . it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”<sup>5</sup> While we might question the epistemological privilege that Berger attributes to sight, it is now quite commonplace to say that *seeing and unseeing* are learned practices. What we see when we look is always culturally circumscribed; it is infused and shaped by the viewer’s beliefs and values.<sup>6</sup> But, both *what* and *how* we see is also affected by those technologies that advance and extend human perceptual capacities while simultaneously training and disciplining them.

3. Heinz, “From Civil Rights to Environmental Rights.”

4. Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*.

5. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 7.

6. Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture.”

Among the many technologies that have reshaped our ways of seeing in the modern era, photography is notable for its political potential. Invented in the 1830s, photography almost immediately revealed its capacity to wield both a revolutionary power to democratize and a repressive power to categorize and discipline.<sup>7</sup> Photography's granular illumination of the world produced marvel for what appeared to be its fidelity to reality. Unlike painting, the mechanical foundation of photography and the exactitude of the representation it produced tended to elide the subjectivity and artistry of the photographer. Thus, the photograph seemed to materialize a new, once invisible, reality at the same time that it obscured the ideology and art of its maker. Entangled in many of the major developments of the nineteenth-century United States, photography contributed to a democratizing aesthetic and the emergence of a mass culture increasingly defined by the visual, but also played a critical role in the modern efforts of making both race and nature.

As a coproducer of nineteenth-century scientific discourse, photography joined phrenology and physiology in the making of race as a tool for categorizing, regulating, and objectifying racial hierarchies and the category of the criminal.<sup>8</sup> Whether in scientific literature, slave portraits, or the reproduction of lynching photos, nineteenth-century photography offered a limited set of racial narratives that dramatically confined the "complexity of black lived experience" and emphasized black passivity and excessive physicality.<sup>9</sup> As it was carried into twentieth-century documentary photography, visual culture scholar Nicole R. Fleetwood finds that two extremes dominate the depiction of black subjects: iconic photos of African Americans advancing civil rights (Rosa Parks, Jesse Owens, Martin Luther King Jr., etc.) and images of "spectacular blackness" that focus on criminal deviance or excessive bodily enactments.<sup>10</sup> Constructing the visual field through the dualisms of hypervisibility/invisibility and hero/deviant, these images polarize the viewer's conception of the black subject and thereby efface the multiplicity, complexity, and normalcy of black life. But, even in those iconic civil rights movement photos that appeared in *Look*, *Life*, *Time*, and white readership newspapers across the US, Martin A. Berger argues that part of what made these photos appealing to progressive white liberals is the repeated imagery of black passivity and white aggression: fire hoses, police dogs, white citizen violence, and vulnerable black children marching. Using multiple examples, Berger explains how the composition of these photos worked to affirm the agency of white liberals while obscuring the structural forms of racism rampant in the North by focusing on the more spectacular, direct, and violent racism exhibited in the South.<sup>11</sup> These images of black passivity and nonviolent leadership in

7. Sekula, "The Body and the Archive."

8. Sekula, "The Body and the Archive"; Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*.

9. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 10.

10. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 36.

11. Berger, *Seeing through Race*.

the civil rights movement were eventually followed by widespread reporting of urban riots and the pathologizing of black nationalism that further circumscribed the visual field of “legitimate” black political action.

Photography’s role in the pathologizing of blackness cannot be extricated from its use as a tool of normalizing whiteness. Visual theorist, Shawn Michelle Smith writes, “As scientists made race observable in bodies of color, using photography to encode and inscribe race in physiognomy and physiology, commercial studio photographers made the whiteness of their primary subjects simply pass unnoticed as ‘normal’ and ‘natural.’”<sup>12</sup> As in portraiture, nineteenth-century landscape photography drew on notions of national power, purity, and the sublime to racialize the natural world as white. Comparing late nineteenth-century Western landscape photography to indigenous depictions, Martin Berger explains the development of an imperial aesthetic that erased the history and presence of native peoples to legitimate the expropriation of their land. Imposing peaks, natural architecture, and the magisterial gaze that captured them “affirm the dominance of European American culture by seamlessly allying it with nature . . . [and] signal the logic and inevitability of white cultural dominance without displaying overt signs of human activity.”<sup>13</sup> Drawing heavily on late nineteenth-century narratives of purity and contamination, these photographs contributed to the construction of an environmental imaginary that envisioned nature as separate from humans and racialized that conception as white.<sup>14</sup>

This imaginary continues to thwart contemporary efforts to build a more inclusive environmentalism by idealizing a racialized landscape that emphasizes affluent ways of interacting with the natural world while excluding the already marginalized by associating them with degraded environments and impoverished green imaginaries.<sup>15</sup> Looking specifically to the imagery adopted by the modern environmental movement, Finis Dunaway argues that images such as the cartoon character Pogo and the figure of the Ecological Indian complemented a narrative focus on *individual* moral conduct that “severed [environmentalism] from questions of power.”<sup>16</sup> The visual culture of environmentalism thus contributed to universalizing narratives that emphasized individual responsibility and obscured the systemic inequality of environmental degradation and hazard.<sup>17</sup> Building on this foundation, Carolyn Finney demonstrates the extent to which contemporary visual representations of green spaces in the popular media and

12. Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 16.

13. Berger, *Sight Unseen*, 79.

14. DeLuca, “In the Shadow of Whiteness”; Kosek, *Understories*; Purdy, *After Nature*; Ray, *Ecological Other*.

15. Braun, “On the Raggedy Edge of Risk”; Gabrielson and Parady, “Corporeal Citizenship”; Sturgeon, *Environmentalism in Popular Culture*.

16. Dunaway, “Gas Masks, Pogo, and the Ecological Indian,” 68.

17. Dunaway, *Seeing Green*.

national park promotional materials continue to focus “on a Euro-American experience of the environment” and are nearly devoid of African Americans and other people of color.<sup>18</sup>

Finney’s findings are consistent with the failure of mainstream environmental organizations and the national parks to recruit and employ African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities, low US national park attendance by people of color, and the long-standing concern that mainstream environmentalism ignores the issues of greatest import to low-income and minority communities.<sup>19</sup> This concern was, in large part, the original impetus of the EJ movement. In her recent book, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle*, Leigh Raiford traces the use of photography in African American social movements and argues that not only has the photograph been deployed strategically as a tool of political activism, but also that “African American social movements have profoundly shaped the ways we understand the politics of photography specifically and of black visibility more broadly.”<sup>20</sup> This influence is palpable in early photos of the modern EJ movement.

While the contemporary EJ movement addresses a wide variety of issues and brings together a diverse array of communities, most trace the movement’s origins to the anti-PCB protests in Warren County, North Carolina in 1982. In this well-known case, the state chose one of the poorest, predominantly African American counties as the site for a toxic waste landfill for the disposal of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) illegally dumped along roadways across the state. In response, local residents engaged in a coordinated nonviolent civil disobedience campaign. Photographs of these protests clearly show the influence of civil rights movement organizers and activists in the form of the marches, protests, rallies, and coalition building they document. Among those civil rights leaders who joined the community were Reverend Ben Chavis and Reverend Joseph Lowery, then of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Reverend Leon White of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice. Much of the documentary evidence suggests an explicit effort on the part of organizers to link back to the visual and political strategies of the civil rights movement in order to show that *the environment* had become the new ground for American racism.<sup>21</sup>

Photography continues to be a critical element in the communication of environmental issues and a growing body of research attends to the role of the visual in environmental politics, rhetoric, and activism.<sup>22</sup> Today, a variety of scholars document the empowering potential of narrated photography in movement organizing and

18. Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, 27.

19. Taylor, *Toxic Communities*; Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*.

20. Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, 7.

21. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*.

22. DeLuca, *Image Politics*; Dobrin and Morey, *Ecosee*; Dunaway, *Seeing Green*; Kurtz, “Reflections on the Iconography”; McLagan and McKee, *Sensible Politics*; Ziser and Sze, “Climate Change, Environmental Aesthetics.”

communication.<sup>23</sup> As in Black Lives Matter, the smartphone has become critical to recent EJ movement efforts to document local environmental degradation, publicize EJ issues, build organizations, resist traditional power dynamics, and amplify the voices of those committed to building more just and sustainable communities.<sup>24</sup> How one achieves these goals is less clear. Analyzing the potential of photography for capturing the particular violence of toxic exposures, Jennifer Peeples underscores the need for multi-image stories that convey the logic of contamination through visuals of the toxic substance, the victim, and a corresponding site.<sup>25</sup> As these examples suggest, over and above other forms of imagery, the photograph is valued for its capacity as a tool of both gathering evidence and appealing to the emotions.

### The Photo Archive

Over roughly two months during the summer of 2015, I worked with research assistants Hannah Stansbury and Alanna Elder to collect and tag roughly 580 website-published photos on environmental justice in the United States. We gathered these photos from the websites of US EJ organizations; the national and regional websites of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); the domestic, mainstream media; and traditional US environmental organizations. Our list of traditional environmental organizations began with “the big ten” initially contacted in the early 1990s by EJ activists and urged to expand their understanding of environmental issues. I then added the largest current national environmental organizations in the US for a total of fourteen organization websites to review. Of these, few offered visual coverage of EJ issues. In some cases, the website offered blog posts or news items on EJ issues, but did not include photographs. Within these websites we searched for images using the term *environmental justice*, but also looked for coverage of EJ issues under related headings such as “community health” or “living toxic-free.” We then collected and tagged all photos related to these issue areas. Given the distinctiveness of the climate justice movement, we did not include energy or climate change topics within our review of any websites. The photos from the EPA were taken from national and regional websites and considered in relation to the stock photos found in an EPA maintained file dedicated to EJ issues and held in the National Archives. In 2015 the EPA websites were largely text-based and used very few images. We searched the national and regional sites using the term *environmental justice*, which is central to EPA policy, and collected and tagged all photos on those sites.<sup>26</sup>

23. Madrigal et al., “Health in My Community”; Smith-Cavros and Eisenhauer, “Overtown”; Teelucksingh and Masuda, “Urban Environmental Justice through the Camera.”

24. Moe, “Why the Smartphone Became the Lightsaber.”

25. Peeples, “Imaging Toxins,” 206.

26. National Archives, 412\_DSP\_Environmental Justice. Eric Vance, EPA chief photographer, series: Stock Photograph Files, January 23, 2005–January 11, 2011, Record Group 412: Records of the Environmental Protection Agency, 1944–2006.

To create the list of EJ organization websites for review, we began with the work of Alejandro Colsa and colleagues, which uses multiple methods to identify the forty “most influential” EJ cases in the US for the Environmental Justice Atlas, an interactive world map of EJ cases.<sup>27</sup> Added to this original list are several large EJ organizations cited in the academic literature, and subtracted from it are EJ organizations that were defunct, no longer had websites, or those that did not feature photographs on their websites. Due to limited resources, we also excluded some of the smaller, more locally focused EJ organizations. The final list consisted of twenty-nine organizations, of which we were able to review eighteen (see appendix for a full list of the organizations) and includes Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund, formerly the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund. This assignment is somewhat controversial given the organization’s history and the fact that it addresses both traditional environmental concerns such as wilderness protection and EJ issues like toxic exposure. Ultimately, the decision was based on Earthjustice’s visual coverage of EJ issues, which is much more similar to that of EJ organizations than it is to that of traditional environmental organizations. For each of the EJ organizations chosen, we collected all photos on the website, excepting Earthjustice. Given the visually saturated character of the website and their work on more traditional environmental issues as well, we limited our collection to all of the inline photographs that accompanied the three major focus areas discussed under the larger umbrella of “Healthy Communities”: “Clean Air,” “Clean Water,” and “Pesticides and Toxic Chemicals.” We then gathered all of the photos included within slideshows of the featured photo essays active within these focus areas. Many of these photographs continue to populate the website.

Finally, one of the more significant challenges in creating this archive was the inattention of the mainstream media in the US to EJ issues and reporting that avoids the term *environmental justice*. For instance, a LexisNexis Academic search using the term *environmental justice* for the period of January 1, 2015, to January 1, 2016, yielded seven citations from the *New York Times*. Of those, two are obituaries, two are letters, one is an editorial, and only two are actual stories. The search term *environmental inequity* fares even worse. Similar problems arose in searching for photos in databases such as the Associated Press Images Collection. The difficulties involved in searching specifically for EJ images in the mainstream media also stem from the breadth of EJ issues, from uranium exposures on Native American lands to food security in urban centers, from elevated asthma rates among African American children to pesticide drift in predominantly Latino communities. And, while there is a long history of reporting stories of environmental pollution, rarely are distributional inequalities in exposure addressed, and even less often does race receive the attention it deserves in studies of these

27. Colsa, et al., “Mapping and Analyzing Environmental Justice in the United States.” For the Environmental Justice Atlas, see <https://ejatlas.org/>.

inequalities.<sup>28</sup> Given these challenges, we drew photos strictly from two high-impact stories reported in national mainstream media outlets that provided significant photographic coverage in their web-based versions: *National Public Radio* (NPR) and *The Center for Public Integrity* (CPI)'s "Poisoned Places: Toxic Air, Neglected Communities" (2011) and *USA Today*'s award-winning "Ghost Factories: Poison in the Ground" (2012).<sup>29</sup> We collected all photos used in these stories. While the stories were not published in 2015, they were still easily accessible online and offered in-depth multimedia investigative reporting of the impacts of pollution on communities.

Drawing on both the scholarship considered for this project and an initial review of the collected photos, I adopted the following categories: fence-line photos, portraits, protest photos, group photos, and political rallies. All remaining photographs were categorized as "other." The category of "other" includes a wide variety of photographs: community gardens, industrial infrastructure, listening sessions, toxic tours, explosions, pets, educational activities, letter writing campaigns, legislative signings, polluted landscapes, signs, airplanes, trucks, phone banks, parties, and a host of other images. These photos could be further categorized, particularly with a larger archive. It should be noted that several of the photographs within the category of "other" were powerful, singular images that deserve further analysis. But, within this archive, the category itself offers information regarding the number and potential diversity of photographs included on any one website. Ultimately, the scholarly literature, photo frequency, and the potential for political impact were the factors that drove the decision to focus on the genres of the fence-line photo, the portrait, and the protest snapshot for this article. A table with each organization and the number of photos within each category can be found in the appendix.

Taken as a whole, this archive reflects the pivotal moment in which it was created. For example, documents suggest that the EPA was in the midst of strategizing a more explicitly visual, mixed-media, web presentation of EJ issues that had not yet been realized. The presidential election of 2016 with its accompanying intensification in the polarization of American politics had not yet occurred. At the time, neither the opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, North Dakota, nor the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, had fully broken as mainstream media stories. Future research will determine how the photojournalism of these conflicts compares to the mainstream media images we collected. The vast majority of photographs we compiled came from

28. As Curtis Brainard reported in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, despite several stories on the effects of pollution on communities in 2011–12 (including those by *NPR* and *USA Today* discussed below), "few have emphasized, let alone focused on, the fact that low-income minority neighborhoods bear the brunt of the burden." Brainard, "An Eye on Environmental Justice."

29. The *USA Today* story won two National Press Club awards including the Joan M. Friedenberg Online Journalism Award; a top reporting award from the Associated Press Media Editors association; the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award for excellence in broadcast and digital journalism; best mobile app and investigative video from the Editor & Publisher EPPY Awards; the Silver Award in the 2012 Barlett & Steele Awards for Investigative Journalism; and a National Academy of Sciences award for science reporting.



domestic EJ organizations, reflecting both the widespread use of photos on these websites and the fairly limited attention given to EJ issues by other actors. In considering this small sample, particularly from the mass media, it is important to note that the aim of this research is not to make definitive claims about the universe of EJ web-published photos or broader claims about how, for instance, the mass media reports EJ issues. Instead, what this limited and time-bound archive offers is an opportunity to identify some of the key elements of the EJ visual landscape, to make some initial observations about how different actors use these elements, and to critically examine the politics both embedded in and emanating from specific photo types. In what follows, I examine three photo genres that populate the EJ visual terrain: the fence-line photo, the portrait, and the protest snapshot.

### **The Fence-Line Photo: Place/Proximity**

One of the most easily recognizable EJ photos is what I will call the “fence-line photo.” Generally, the fence-line photo is characterized by the following elements: first, a physical reference to children or community through either a home, a school, or, most often, a playground, a soccer field, a basketball court, or a community park (children may or may not be present); second, a fence, often chain-link; third, a pollution source, usually an industrial facility with smokestacks and visible pollution. One of the constitutive features of this genre is its juxtaposition of the domestic and industrial, the “pure” and polluting, the powerless and the powerful. While these dualisms tend to simplify complex issues, they also forcefully illustrate the fence-line photo’s primary objective, which is to communicate the close proximity of families to industrial zones and high polluting facilities. To a lesser extent, fence-line photos convey the fact that the residents of these communities, who are at greater risk of health consequences, are more likely to be poor and people of color.

While versions of the fence-line photo appeared on the websites of all the groups examined in this essay, they did so with important differences in context, frequency, and composition. As is the case with all photos, the larger visual, textual, and political contexts that frame fence-line photos make a significant difference in the extent to which these photos concretize the structural injustice of environmental degradation and work to create a landscape in which EJ subjects are viewed as equal citizens. Our photo archive revealed a few significant differences in the way various actors created and used these photos. First, there was a range in the extent to which a fence-line photo was visually contextualized; second, there were differences in the frequency with which they were used; and third, some fence-line photos included human subjects while others did not. Across these dimensions, EJ organization websites occupied one end of the spectrum and EPA websites the other. This section draws heavily from these extremes to illustrate the visual politics in play.

On EJ organization websites, the fence-line photo rarely appeared. But when it did it usually included people of color, and the larger visual and narrative context within which the photos were situated reminded the viewer that the burdens of toxic exposure

are systematically and unfairly distributed. To take one prominent example, the website of Earthjustice, the nation's largest nonprofit environmental law organization, features a slide show of Eric Kayne's photos on air pollution caused by oil refineries in Manchester and Port Arthur, Texas. The slide show incorporates a variety of images including landscapes engulfed in smog, refinery flaring, abandoned property, contaminated fruit trees, maps, portraits of community activists, and fence-line photos. By embedding the fence-line photo in a larger visual context, the image becomes anchored in the life and actions of a specific community facing particular challenges. Combined with captions that describe the community role or actions of pictured individuals, fence-line photos illustrate the human impact of living in a degraded environment while giving specificity to that experience and honoring *the variety* of activities that make up life in the community.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, in 2015 fence-line photos appeared quite often on EPA websites, particularly given the limited number of photos employed overall, but rarely did they include people. Many of the EPA photos were taken from 2006–10 by Eric Vance, chief photographer for the EPA, and are tagged with the keywords “EJustice,” “Smokestack,” and sometimes “House,” implying a clearly defined and intentional perspective.<sup>31</sup> While the intentions of any one photographer are critical to the construction of a photograph, it is also important to note that a public photograph is the creation of many hands and shaped by “a very wide field of desires, interests, and tastes which contract with the photographer for its production.”<sup>32</sup> The EPA photos were used, most often, as singular images, abstracted from a larger visual narrative, to dramatically convey the subject matter of a feature story or set of policies. One frequently reproduced image includes a refinery in the near distance, a chain-link fence, and a faded blue slide in the immediate foreground. In 2015, this photo accompanied a blog post on the release of an online mapping tool to rank county health and was also used in the banner for the EPA's environmental justice blog.<sup>33</sup> As this example illustrates, fence-line photos can be used as singular images precisely because they so powerfully convey the problem of proximity. This power contributes to the greater mobility of these photos and suggests the potential of the genre to serve as an iconic image for environmental injustice with the capacity, as Rob Nixon explains, to “embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency.”<sup>34</sup>

30. Kayne, “Fighting for Clean Air in the Shadow of Oil Refineries.”

31. The photos most often used on EPA websites are held in a National Archives collection of EPA stock photos housed in a file explicitly marked “Photographs Relating to Environmental Justice.” National Archives, 412\_DSP\_Environmental Justice. Eric Vance, EPA chief photographer, series: Stock Photograph Files, January 23, 2005–January 21, 2011, Record Group 412: Records of the Environmental Protection Agency, 1944–2006.

32. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine*, 25.

33. Schwarz, “County Health Rankings.”; for the EJ blog, see [https://blog.epa.gov/blog/category/environmental\\_justice/](https://blog.epa.gov/blog/category/environmental_justice/).

34. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 10.

But two potential problems arise when the fence-line photo is uprooted from the specific experiences of individual communities. First, the photo is less likely to convey the fact that proximity is a systematic and distributive injustice. Magnifying the EPA's "blue slide" photo reveals that this park is near the Valero Houston Refinery located in Manchester, Texas; the same place where the Earthjustice slide show makes explicit the fact that 89 percent of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino.<sup>35</sup> A second disadvantage to using fence-line photos as single images is that it portrays communities in almost exclusively negative terms that invite the viewer to associate low-income families and people of color with degraded environments, vulnerability, and passivity. This association is more likely, and damaging, given the enduring whiteness of the mainstream environmental movement and the paucity of images associating people of color, and African Americans in particular, with the pristine, national park, and recreational landscapes that traditionally characterize environmentalism.<sup>36</sup> In reinforcing this association, single-image fence-line photos oversimplify and thereby efface the variety, complexity, and normalcy of the lives of EJ subjects and erase their attachments to home and the lands on which they live.

Turning from photo context to composition, most fence-line photos are shot from a mid-range that allows the photographer to capture the nearness of industry to everyday life. Dominated by smoke stacks, emission plumes, and imposing or visually complex industrial structures, the background materializes both the generally invisible toxic agents to which communities are exposed and, *potentially*, the power hierarchies that make those who occupy the foreground particularly vulnerable. A range of whites, dirty grays, and faded neutrals comprise the palette, reinforcing the sense of environmental degradation. In some photos, industrial structures like cooling towers and container terminals loom over houses, laundry lines, and playing fields, flattening the perceptible distance between neighborhood and industrial zone. In others, a shallow depth of field focuses the eye on an EJ subject in the foreground, a child on a bike or teenagers playing basketball, while the background recedes into a grainy sea of industrial infrastructure suggesting the all-encompassing experience of life on the fence-line. A third compositional approach offers the viewer a point of entry that guides the gaze from the domestic to the industrial. Examples include an EPA photo by Eric Vance that frames playground equipment and a nearby refinery with the inverted V of swing-set poles, and a Les Stone photo for Greenpeace in which Clara Smith, a ninety-six-year-old black woman, looks through the curtains of her window onto the Shell oil refinery with the caption, "just a couple of yards away."<sup>37</sup>

35. Eric Vance, March 13, 2008, 412\_DSP\_EJustice\_027. Stock Photograph Files, November 3, 1999–March 16, 2015. Environmental Protection Agency. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5998247>.

36. Taylor, *Toxic Communities*; Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*.

37. Eric Vance, EPA chief photographer, March 13, 2008, Environmental Protection Agency, File Unit 412\_DSP\_Environmental\_Justice\_028. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5998248>. <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/toxics/issues/>.

To varying degrees, these techniques suggest that fence-line photos are designed to document existing conditions for a viewer who is largely unaware and is located fully outside of the frame. In nearly all fence-line photos the vanishing point is an industrial structure (often a smoke stack) and the industrial site is positioned at a frontal angle to the viewer, demanding full attention. In some of the photos, a road or a path draws the viewer into the scene. In those with human subjects, rarely do they directly engage the viewer with their bodies or their gaze. Instead, they are often pictured as absorbed in their own activities and shot from an oblique angle, creating social distance rather than connection. As scholars Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen write, “The difference between the oblique and the frontal angle is the difference between detachment and involvement.”<sup>38</sup> To return to the photo of Clara Smith, she is pictured in profile at an oblique angle to the viewer as she looks out her window at the Shell infrastructure. Encased within the photo frame, Smith becomes an object, while the profile view, oblique photo angle, and the direction of her gaze all reinforce her isolation and disconnection from the viewer. Each of the compositional choices described here works to position the viewer as an invisible onlooker safely removed, environmentally and socially, from the landscape. The fence-line photo, then, can subtly ascribe a position of environmental and racial advantage to the viewer that is denied to the subjects represented, a point that is amplified when one considers the subjects most often portrayed.

Across all fence-line photos collected children are the principal subjects—whether material or spectral. Overrepresented in environmental visual culture generally, child subjects work to arouse the deep-seated parental fear of being unable to protect one’s own, particularly in those spaces that ought to offer refuge from external assault—the home, playground, school, and church. These photos appeal to the viewer’s sense of justice by implicitly drawing a comparison to the places where children *should* play, places that are clean, green, and safe. As such, the photos highlight the moral imperative to protect the innocent yet depict the EJ subject as one with little power, one who must be represented by others, and thereby depoliticizes the issue by softening the claims for justice, deferring notions of civic equality and reserving political agency to the viewer rather than the subject. Yet, at the same time, many of the children shown are active: running, biking, playing, breathing, touching, ingesting, and metabolizing their world. They thereby offer a visual for thinking about the complex interconnections among the porous human body and its embeddedness in a physical environment.<sup>39</sup> For those removed from these conditions, children provide a sort of lively imaginative wormhole through which the viewer might conceive the noise, the smell, the *feel* of living in close proximity to industrial zones and reflect on the injustices it produces.<sup>40</sup>

38. Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 136.

39. Gabrielson and Parady, “Corporeal Citizenship.”

40. On rare occasions, adults are also the subject of fence-line photos, a point I will discuss in the section on portraits.

Unlike photos with active figures, most of the fence-line photos used on EPA websites do not include people at all. Instead, they reference human activity through structures such as houses, playgrounds, roads, and parks. The absence of humans gives these photos a ghostly feel, as though the photographer aimed to render an apocalyptic materialization of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. This emptiness is often heightened by the fact that these photos usually appear in isolation, as single illustrations of a publication, featured story, or blog post. A generous reading might assert that the notable absence of people is designed to create an imagined space open to the insertion of *any* (a white) *body*. Yet, if these images are designed to serve as a reminder of universal vulnerability, then they harken back to the tendency within mainstream environmentalism to obscure the distributional inequalities at the core of environmental injustice as they further erase the environmental presence and commitments of people of color. Since the 1994 signing of Executive Order 12898, which required federal agencies to address environmental injustice, one can trace critical shifts in the EPA's language. But recent actions also indicate agency efforts to adopt a new, explicitly visual strategy that will "reach and resonate with target audiences."<sup>41</sup> While this moment may have passed due to more existential threats, these documents suggest a concerted movement within the EPA to think critically about the visual politics of environmental justice and to craft an inclusive strategy with broad appeal. It is worth noting that while economic distress often appeared in fence-line photos through details such as the modest size of homes, the lack of landscaping, and structural decay such as chipped paint and sagging roofs, very rarely did white people appear in this genre, a finding worthy of further research.

### **The Portrait: Citizen/Subject**

The photographic portrait has a long history in the US, one deeply entangled with the politics of race, class, and gender. Initially a form reserved for the political elite, photography democratized the portrait, making both its bourgeois aesthetic and the possibility of self-representation widely available. For nineteenth-century African Americans, such as Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass (the most photographed American of that century), the portrait became a means to convey the humanity of African Americans in a visual culture thick with racist imagery.<sup>42</sup> Douglass, more often noted for his oratory than for his visual theory, understood the power of photography to both "correct the distorted representations of black manhood" and to disrupt socially produced "habits of looking" that reinforced inequality.<sup>43</sup> For African American photographers, like Augustus Washington, the portrait offered the means to visually establish notions of liberal

41. "Working to Make a Visible Difference in Communities: Fiscal Year 2016 Annual Action Plan." Environmental Protection Agency, [www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-12/documents/fy16-communities-action-plan.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-12/documents/fy16-communities-action-plan.pdf) (accessed February 12, 2016).

42. Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass*.

43. For "correct the distorted representations of black manhood," see Wexler, "A More Perfect Likeness" 24; for "habits of looking," see Hill, "Rightly Viewed," 42.

citizenship across the color line as black subjects used the medium to demonstrate self-possession and demand equal respect.<sup>44</sup> Through photographic details from the subject's pose, facial expression, gaze, and dress, to the artifacts included within the frame and the larger studio setting, portraits were carefully composed to reflect a middle-class respectability.

Well into the twentieth century, bell hooks argued that portraiture was critically important to African American families because it “provided a necessary narrative, a way for us to enter history without words.”<sup>45</sup> The wall of family portraits was a self-constructed visual field of respect, normalcy, history, and affection largely denied in the broader culture. As hooks suggests, portraits visually capture the connection between the private and the public by both representing and cultivating a domestic aesthetic that conveys the economic, affective, and cultural stability expected of a solid citizen. Yet, the democratic potential of the portrait—so evident in the hyper-circulating identity performance of the “selfie,” the proliferation of digital technologies, and the access the internet makes possible—is still constrained by ideological, institutional, and capitalist structures that often work to maintain existing power hierarchies. Among these, the white gaze has long functioned “to objectify the Black body as an entity that is to be feared, disciplined, and relegated to those marginalized, imprisoned, and segregating spaces that restrict Black bodies from ‘disturbing’ the tranquility of white life, white comfort, white embodiment, and white being.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, despite historical efforts to use the portrait as a means to assert black agency and establish self-possession, the genre has also been adopted to depict a variety of subjects as disempowered, passive, and abject and thereby to cultivate ways of seeing that insulate the viewer from the subject's experience and erode civic connection.

Within the visual landscape of environmental justice, portraits occupy a critical space. At once, they convey the human impact of environmental degradation, personalize complex policy issues, and offer a vivid affective lens for considering questions of justice. Portraits can be found on the websites of all the groups included in this study, but with significant differences in tone, affect, and purpose. They range from formal portraits of EPA officials, to richly textured close-ups of children, to heroic portraits of EJ activists in the field. In one of the few works that explicitly engages the value of the portrait to EJ work, Joshua Trey Barnett elaborates the potential of what he calls “toxic portraits” or “close-up, in situ photographs of people in toxically assaulted places” to make visible the pain and suffering that living in degraded environments often produces and to “make it possible for viewers to imagine ways of responding.”<sup>47</sup> Based on a close reading of two portraits taken by Steve Lerner and web-published for the EJ

44. Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*.

45. hooks, “In Our Glory,” 52.

46. Yancy, *Black Bodies*, xvi.

47. Barnett, “Toxic Portraits,” 405–06.

organization Collaborative Health and the Environment in 2007, Barnett argues that toxic portraits are most compelling when they offer to the viewer a vulnerable adult subject who looks directly at the camera lens.<sup>48</sup> Such a subject initiates a claim of justice on the viewer as an equal citizen. But, at the same time, in registering sickness and suffering, the subject's body implicitly challenges a liberal conception of citizenship that imagines the self as fully contained and separate from one's environment. While toxic portraits did appear in our archive, they were relatively few in number and came primarily from EJ organizations.<sup>49</sup>

Setting aside formal portraits of government officials and environmental organization leaders, and the ubiquitous group photo (discussed briefly in the next section), children were often the subjects of portraits. For example, on a report examining disease clusters the Natural Resources Defense Council features a close-up of a white female child smiling softly, nestled in greenery, with a colorful scarf protecting her tilted head, while the Environmental Defense Fund offers a tight close-up of a Latina child who gazes steadily at the viewer as she uses an inhaler in a story on raising community awareness about the health impacts of smog. Portraits of children also appear in the two mainstream media stories reviewed for our archive: *National Public Radio* (NPR) and *The Center for Public Integrity's* (CPI) "Poisoned Places: Toxic Air, Neglected Communities" (2011) and *USA Today's* award-winning "Ghost Factories: Poison in the Ground" (2012). In both, the principal claim is that the investigative reporting reveals the government's failure to protect communities, and particularly children, from avoidable toxic exposures. Illustrating these stories are photos, both historic and contemporary, of polluting facilities, neighborhood streets, homes and lawns, pets, children at play, examples of air and soil sampling technology; fence-line photos; and portraits. Portraits are a common feature in photojournalism precisely because they personalize abstract stories and dramatize the stakes of an issue that may not otherwise appeal to broad audiences.<sup>50</sup> Children amplify these aspects of news coverage and tend to be overrepresented visually in coverage of the environment in particular.<sup>51</sup> Embodying universal vulnerability, innocence, and the future, the bodies of children underscore the government's obligation to protect its citizens. The portrait, long an object of affection and sentimentality, draws the reader in to identify with the subject as someone who belongs to a family and underscores the violation of the intimacies of the home in many EJ issues. Most needful of protection and representation, children are depicted as powerless. And, despite reporting on the collective action taken by many communities, the visuals within these stories tend to cast most adults as passive victims as well.

48. Lerner, "Corpus Christi."

49. With a resemblance to both the fence-line photos examined above and the portraits discussed in this section, the toxic portrait occupies one of those productive spaces described in the conclusion.

50. Freund, *Photography and Society*; Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*.

51. Dunaway, *Seeing Green*.

In both of these stories, adults are shown either with their children or in single-subject portraits that convey victimization and a loss of agency. In a Jason Miller photograph for *USA Today*, African American Ken Shefton is shown with his son Jonathan, who stands between his seated father's legs with closed eyes and a warm smile as he affectionately leans in to his father's chest. Occupying the left, front corner of the photo, father and son both wear dark blue pants and light blue button-down shirts. The surrounding scene is a debris-strewn, chain-link-fenced, concrete yard near dirty and worn steps leading into a home in the background. Taken from slightly above, the photo empowers the viewer while Ken Shefton's body surrounds his son. His chin rests on Jonathan's head, eyes are downcast, his expression sorrowful. The caption explains that Jonathan has been diagnosed with high levels of toxic substances in his blood. In the NPR series, a similar feel attends the portrait of Tonga Nolan, whom John W. Poole captures in a close-up against a warmly hued and grainy background. Light streams in from a nearby window onto Ms. Nolan, who is gazing downward to her right with a solemn expression. Visually, both of these individuals appear down-trodden, dejected, and tired. Yet, Ms. Nolan is an attorney who has since brought suit against Exxon Mobil, and Mr. Shefton is a man whose anger and agency mobilized him to sell his house and move his five children to a new neighborhood. While the stories explain these details, the portraits strip away the skills, expertise, and agency of these citizens. The subjects are cast as objects of sympathy or pity, but not as equal citizens for whom the viewer might feel righteous indignation, outrage at the injustices experienced, or solidarity. Similarly, the subjects do not directly address the viewer, they do not express anger or demand respect, and they do not appear as co-citizens with whom one might join in collective action. Instead, they are infantilized in their naive trust of the government, their lack of knowledge, and their seeming passivity.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast, both the toxic portraits examined by Barnett and several portraits of EJ activists in our archive offer alternatives. In an Eric Kayne photo for Earthjustice, activist Yudith Nieto stands at the edge of a park in Manchester, Texas, with a billowing refinery behind her. Sharply in focus, she is shot from a low angle and bathed in light from the upper right corner of the photo; she appears larger than life. Her body facing the viewer, Ms. Nieto holds an air-sampling canister while she looks purposefully toward the source of light. The low angle empowers her, the prop reinforces her agency, and her gaze directs the viewer toward a hopeful future.<sup>53</sup> Importantly, however, this photo also does not directly express anger or injury. In a recent article published by the *Detroit Free Press* on the Flint water crisis, Chelsea Grimmer argues that making environmental injustice visible requires a "molecular hieroglyphics of the flesh that is

52. Berlant, *Queen of America*.

53. Kayne, "Fighting for Clean Air in the Shadow of Oil Refineries." For directional analyses of visual imagery, see Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.



otherwise culturally unseen via racialization.”<sup>54</sup> Grimmer’s sophisticated analysis is too complex to treat in full here, but she compares a close-up photo of a lesion on the up-held hand of an African American woman, Carolyn Doshie, with a group photo of protestors holding portraits of their families. Against those who would emphasize the normalizing value of the family portraits, Grimmer argues that the family photo merely papers-over the long histories of violence embodied in the flesh of the marginalized and asserts the need for a visual strategy that traces the structural violence of the past through its materialization in the pain, suffering, and flesh of contemporary people whose mattering is systematically disavowed. While limited in its scope, Grimmer’s analysis contributes to our understanding of the politics at work in communicating environmental justice. The portraits described in this section point to the difficulties of visually negotiating the competing demands of agency and injury, disproportionate harm and universal human vulnerability, racialized stereotypes and normalizing imagery, structural violence and everyday intimacy.

### **Protest Photos: Action/Agency**

More than any other actor examined in this project, EJ organizations use photographs to depict their work. At the center of these efforts lies the protest photo, a genre that is used infrequently on the websites of the other actors archived for this project.<sup>55</sup> Given the long history and centrality of protest to both early environmentalism and the EJ movement, it is somewhat surprising that historical photos rarely appear on contemporary EJ websites. Nonetheless, today’s photos cannot be extricated from the deep public archive of environmental protest photos that shape their reception. We might trace its origins to the 1950s photos of demonstrations by well-heeled, gas-mask-wearing, white Angelenos against smog, through the 1970s suburban protests in Love Canal led by Lois Gibbs, to the early 1980s protests in Warren County, North Carolina, that forged a critical link between environmental degradation and race to the recent protests in Flint, Michigan, and Standing Rock, North Dakota. The shifting demographics of this archive are unmistakable and parallel the well-documented change in tactics within mainstream environmentalism from a grassroots to a legalistic strategy. Rooted in this history, when compared with both the fence-line photo and the portrait, the protest photo emphasizes collective action above all else.

Like classic examples, the EJ protest photos portray political speech and action. They depict marchers carrying signs, banners, bullhorns, and flags. Often, the protestors are pictured with mouths open in chants or shouts or covered by surgical masks.

54. Grimmer, “Racial Microbiopolitics,” 27.

55. In the case of the mainstream media, this absence is due, in part, to the stories chosen for review. The genre of the protest photo itself owes much to photojournalism and to the press’s coverage of not only the civil rights movement, but also environmentalism. At the same time, limited attention to EJ issues at the national level, particularly in the time frame studied, suggests that coverage is more likely to be local and event driven. How the protest photo of the mainstream media compares to that of EJ organizations is a topic ripe for future research, but not one considered here.

Framed so as to accentuate the size of the protest and the message of the marchers, the photos tend either to take a wide angle that includes as many people as possible or to zoom in on one or two protestors with others filling the near background. Depending on the issue and location, the demographics of the protestors vary, but people of color tend to predominate within groups that are notably diverse. The photos are colorful, the marchers gathered outdoors, usually along a street, their arms may be raised, their children in tow holding signs of their own. While varying markers of the community appear in the background, these photos focus on the *people* who articulate their environmental concerns with the signs they carry. And, while the photos convey solidarity, community, and action, they are unlike the iconic civil rights and Warren County protest photos in that the action of the photo is rarely defined by violence or conflict between the marchers and the corporate and/or governmental interests they oppose.<sup>56</sup> A few depict bodies used nonviolently to obstruct corporate action, but these are rare. By and large, the protests shown appear orderly and sanctioned, suggesting the community that is created in the sharing of these images does not require actively building an oppositional group identity.<sup>57</sup>

While EJ organization websites vary in their appearance, they tend to emphasize organization, advocacy, leadership, and change campaigns on a set of issues. In keeping with this mission, protest photos are positioned within a larger visual field constructed to attract participants. From the protest photo, the subjects and actions of EJ organization photographs proliferate in a wild and diverse flowering of images depicting community, collective action, injustice, and pride. The second most frequently used image on EJ organization websites is the group photo. Standing together, often in matching t-shirts, holding signs and banners, the group photo celebrates community action on a particular campaign. These are proud photos that communicate the group's success and accomplishments; the subjects *smile*. Implicit in this pride is an attachment to place that signals the centrality of neighborhoods to EJ goals. Accompanying protest and group photos, EJ organization websites include pictures of community gardens, community members testifying, listening sessions, neighborhood cleanups, meetings, document signings, and objects such as toys identified in toxic consumer product campaigns. There are some, but not many, photos of polluted landscapes and, as already mentioned, there are only a few fence-line photos. Rather than carefully crafted professional photographs, the snapshot reigns. *Many* of the photos feature young people. In keeping with the sheer number, variety, and energy of the photos used, EJ organization websites have the look and feel of people on the go.

In this context, the EJ subject emerges not as an individual, but as an action-oriented, empowering *community*. The visual emphasis on community is consistent with activist perspectives, African American owned newspaper coverage of EJ issues,

56. Berger, *Seeing through Race*.

57. Gunckel, "Building a Movement and Constructing Community."

and stated EJ organization goals such as that of WE ACT: “building healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and/or low income residents participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices.”<sup>58</sup> The focus on people over landscape creates room to discuss the full panoply of EJ issues, but also suggests that EJ organizations are engaged in a process of self-definition for an audience that likely shares their concerns. If one is aware of the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on low-income and minority communities, there is little need to depict these features of the physical environment. Instead, what must be conveyed is the value of the neighborhood and the powerful impact communities can make to change these conditions. By focusing on community successes through collective action, EJ organization websites materialize agency as a distributed and relational phenomenon, one that amplifies the capacity of individual citizens engaged in work that matters.<sup>59</sup> Positive and empowering, EJ organizations appear to be collectives that one would want to join. Yet, in prominently portraying community protests, these websites also articulate the anger that mobilizes community action. In doing so, the websites appeal not to the viewers’ sympathy, but to their sense of justice and solidarity.

To conclude this section, I turn to a different sort of protest photo published by the EJ organization Alternatives for Community and Environment and posted with a story on their nearly twenty-year history of action that culminated in a Boston city ordinance reducing allowable diesel emissions.<sup>60</sup> Journalistic in character, the photo is shot from a slightly oblique angle and depicts two teenage men of color sitting side by side. They lean forward, listening and intently watching something directly in front of them. The photo is closely cropped and taken from a low angle such that one of the young men dominates the entire right hand side of the photo while the opposite upper left hand corner recedes into an empty gray corner of the room, further underscoring the young man’s presence and the intensity of his forward looking gaze. Wearing a surgical mask printed with the words “CLEAN AIR,” a gray hoodie, and a Red Sox baseball cap, he sits next to his peer who looks ahead, skeptically, his head turned slightly as if about to lean in to make a side comment. A smattering of other people, some with masks others without, are seated behind them and to the left. While there is no caption, the accompanying story suggests they are attending hearings at Boston City Hall.<sup>61</sup> The photo takes these young men seriously—as citizens. It projects their reflectiveness and their

58. For activist perspectives, see Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, and for African American newspaper coverage see Heinz, “From Civil Rights to Environmental Rights”; WE ACT, “Our Story,” <https://www.weact.org/whoweare/ourstory/> (accessed December 1, 2018).

59. For this conception of agency, see Gabrielson, “Bodies, Environments, and Agency.”

60. ACE: Alternatives for Community and Environment. “Victory for Clean Air!” [https://ace-ej.org/victory\\_for\\_clean\\_air](https://ace-ej.org/victory_for_clean_air), June 3, 2015, photo at bottom of page.

61. Unattributed photo. Internet published photos of the Boston City Hall Council Chamber confirm their location.

active political participation within normalized democratic processes. In doing so, it forcefully protests those racialized modes of viewing that radically restrict young black men to identities as athletes, criminal deviants, and sources of violence and disorder. While the photo does not register overt anger, it does not preclude it either and in this hanging balance it arrestingly captures the stamina and resolve that protest demands.

### Conclusion

Each of the three photo genres identified in this article emphasize different aspects of environmental justice. In contrast to the imagery of mainstream environmental organizations that often uncouples the natural world from human communities, EJ advocates conceptualize the environment as the places where we “live, work, and play.” Fence-line photos skillfully capture this conceptualization and envision the environment as a critical element of community health. They also forcefully convey the experience of living in close proximity to high-polluting industries and can be composed and contextualized to question the power hierarchies that disproportionately expose low-income families and communities of color to environmental risks. But isolated as single images or absent human subjects, fence-line photos run the risk of obscuring systematic exposures and reinforcing cultural associations between degraded environments and marginalized communities.

While fence-line photos make environmental pollutants visible, portraits personalize their effects. Literally bringing home the human impact of environmental harms, the domestic aesthetic of the portrait articulates environmental injustice as a violation of the home, the family, and the body. Where fence-line photos speak to the political by situating everyday practices in the immediate context of industry, the portrait reveals the intimacy of this violence and the suffering it produces. Both contribute to what political theorist John Meyer argues is the key to building a more inclusive environmentalism by focusing on the material practices of the everyday in ways that illuminate the political as a “quality of those everyday acts that affect us collectively and help to constitute our world.”<sup>62</sup> Yet, the portrait is a malleable genre that allows for a range of representations of EJ subjects from the self-possessed citizen to the abject victim. As such, it can either reinforce or disrupt racialized, classed, and gendered ways of seeing. Most productively in this context, the portrait offers a means for illuminating human pain, suffering, and anger while acknowledging the constrained character of human agency, the porosity of the human body, and the injustice of the disproportionate vulnerability of racialized flesh.

Moving from the home to the street, the genre of the protest photo is the most inherently political, given its depiction of public speech and collective action. While the photos archived here celebrate the causes of EJ activists and emphasize the agency of communities fighting environmental injustice, the rich history of the protest photo

62. Meyer, *Engaging the Everyday*, 17.

attests to the multiple valences this genre affords depending on the audience it is intended to reach. For EJ organizations, the protest photo appears as part of a larger visual strategy that encourages participation, activism, and community attachment. Too often, as Carolyn Finney explains, the environmental interests and experiences of people of color are either erased or *restricted solely* to the EJ movement where people of color and low-income citizens are depicted as victims rather than as environmental agents or civic partners in the shaping of a green future.<sup>63</sup> The websites of EJ organizations actively work to disrupt such associations by deploying a diversity of images that reinforce the collective, democratic agency of citizens and depicting a wide variety of human activities that demonstrate both engagement with and an attachment to the environment—understood, at once, as both social and ecological.

In identifying three of the key photographic genres that frequently appear in the presentation of EJ issues and thinking critically about the visual politics that both surround and emanate from them, this essay aims to contribute to the building of a more inclusive socio-ecological imaginary. With careful attention to how images are composed and contextualized for intended audiences, each of these photo genres may contribute to visual strategies designed to draw attention to environmental injustice as a national and global issue and to simultaneously disrupt racialized modes of viewing that depict low-income people and people of color as either passive victims or as somehow deserving of the degraded environments in which they live. Notably, few of the photos in our archive powerfully conveyed the anger and alienation that attend the experience of injustice. This may be a consequence of the difficulty of negotiating the competing political demands of documenting the experiences of marginalized communities, achieving a tone that positions EJ subjects as co-citizens engaged in collective action, and attracting allies to EJ battles. All of these are critical to envisioning a more inclusive socio-ecological politics. But, as some of the photos described in this article explore, so too is the more conceptual work of portraying the productive ground between agency and injury, self-possession and the porosity of the human body, and disproportionate impact and universal human vulnerability.

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63. Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*.

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## Appendix: Environmental Justice photo archive, 2015

Organization	Type	Fence-		Group				Total
		line	Portrait	Protest	Photo	Rally	Other	
Alternatives for Community and Environment	EJ Org	0	0	6	9	3	13	31
Asia Pacific Environmental Network	EJ Org	0	1	3	1	1	3	9
Bay Area Environmental Health Collaborative	EJ Org	1	1	16	3	4	13	37
Communities for a Better Environment	EJ Org	0	2	10	2	0	10	24
Coming Clean	EJ Org	0	2	2	0	0	1	5
Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice	EJ Org	1	2	1	1	0	5	10
Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment	EJ Org	1	7	14	7	1	14	44
Deep South Center for Environmental Justice	EJ Org	1	0	1	1	0	14	17
Earthjustice	EJ Org	7	12	5	1	1	19	45
Environmental Justice Health Alliance	EJ Org	5	0	5	8	0	28	46
Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice	EJ Org	0	1	51	4	17	12	85
Indigenous Environmental Network	EJ Org	0	0	3	2	0	8	13
Little Village Environmental Justice Organization	EJ Org	2	0	3	8	2	18	33
Louisiana Bucket Brigade	EJ Org	0	2	0	2	0	3	7
National Black Environmental Justice Network	EJ Org	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance	EJ Org	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services	EJ Org	0	0	1	1	0	1	3
West Harlem Environmental Action; WE ACT for Environmental Justice	EJ Org	0	4	3	4	0	6	17
EarthFirst!	ENV Org	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Environmental Defense Fund	ENV Org	1	2	0	0	0	5	8
Forest Stewardship Council	ENV Org	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Friends of the Earth	ENV Org	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Greenpeace	ENV Org	1	0	3	0	0	5	9
Izaak Walton League	ENV Org	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Natl Audubon Society	ENV Org	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
National Parks Conservation Association	ENV Org	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
National Resource Defense Council	ENV Org	0	2	2	1	1	5	11
National Wildlife Federation	ENV Org	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Nature Conservancy	ENV Org	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Sierra Club	ENV Org	0	1	2	1	0	0	4
The Wilderness Society	ENV Org	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
World Wildlife Fund	ENV Org	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
National and Regional Environmental Protection Agency websites	Federal Agency	6	2	0	2	0	9	19
National Public Radio/ USA Today	Mainstream US Media	10	14	0	0	0	22	46
Totals		36	59	132	59	30	217	533*

\*The total archive contains 578 photos. The excluded 45 photos include historical photos of key moments in the history of environmental justice in the United States and media images that were excluded from consideration upon deciding to focus on two specific web-published stories.