

Ecojustice Stories-To-Live-By

The climate crisis is, of course, only a symptom of a much larger crisis, a sustainability crisis, a social crisis, a crisis of inequality that dates back to colonialism and beyond, a crisis based on the idea that some people are worth more than others and therefore have the right to exploit and steal other people's lands and resources. And it is very naive to believe that we can solve this crisis without confronting the roots of it.

—Greta Thunberg (October 2021)

To some extent, how, or whether or not, to confront the “roots” of the crisis highlights key distinctions among climate action leaders. For some, like climate scientist Michael Mann (2021), capsizing the existing economic system of capitalism, for example, is ill-advised; system change might be a longer-term solution, but a host of actions can and need to be taken now to avert more severe climate impacts. For others, such as Naomi Klein (2014), humanity is presented with a stark choice; it's either capitalism or the climate because the reality of the climate crisis “changes everything.” With this view, more radical reforms are necessary, such as “making extreme wealth extinct” (Monbiot, 2021).

While this book is not focused on the exploration and evaluation of climate-related solutions, our starting point is to understand climate change in terms of (in)justice. Adverse effects of climate change are felt disproportionately around the world with poorer countries and communities far more likely to experience climate-related food and water insecurity, dislocation, and forced migration. A historical perspective also highlights extensive connections between climate change and economics, race, gender, and colonization. The co-chair of the Climate Justice Alliance, Elizabeth Yeampierre, draws a “direct line from slavery and rapacious exploitation of natural resources to current issues of environmental justice” (Gardiner, 2020). Yeampierre points out that climate change stems from a legacy of colonialism, slavery, and land and resource extraction. She notes:

A lot of times when people talk about environmental justice they go back to the 1970s or '60s. But I think about the slave quarters. I think about people who got

the worst food, the worst health care, the worst treatment, and then when freed, were given lands that were eventually surrounded by things like petrochemical industries. The idea of killing black people or indigenous people, all of that has a long, long history that is centered on capitalism and the extraction of our land and our labor in this country. (In Gardiner, 2020)

Bringing this history into the present, Reverend Lennox Yearwood Jr., (2020), a minister and community activist and president of the Hip Hop Caucus, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to youth political empowerment, contends that the climate crisis and environmental injustice are bound together because they “play out within the same systems of white supremacy and structural racism” (para. 8).

Tuck and Yang (2012) outline the need to unsettle ignorance and innocence: The idea of reconciliation with systems of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and structural racism based on the theft and destruction of Indigenous lands is untenable. Speaking about “hope in common,” Graeber (2008) notes that we have created a “vast bureaucratic apparatus for the creation and maintenance of hopelessness, a giant machine, designed, first and foremost, to destroy any sense of possible alternative futures” (para. 3). Graeber suggests there is a need to engage with possible alternative futures:

What remains is what we are able to promise one another. Directly. Without the mediation of economic and political bureaucracies. The revolution begins by asking: what sort of promises do free men and women make to one another, and how, by making them, do we begin to make another world? (final para.)

Given the realities of our historical moment, it is time to contest intricately crafted, complex, and destructive stories-*we-have-lived-by* and “re-story” our relationships with each other and the world (Damico et al., 2020; Kimmerer, 2013; Latour, 2018). One compelling way to do this is by investigating *ecojustice stories-To-live-by*.

THREE ECOJUSTICE STORIES-TO-LIVE-BY

Grounded in ideas of Earth democracy (Shiva, 2005) that emphasize cultural and natural diversities, human and ecological well-being, and concern for social and ecological justice (Peters, 2017), we explore three interrelated *stories-To-live-by*. While not necessarily “new,” and by no means exhaustive, these stories align with cultural traditions that can help address our current crises.

1. All Life Is Treated With Respect, Care, and Responsibility, Especially Our Most Vulnerable Populations and Species

This *ecojustice story-To-live-by* is grounded in a feminist ethic of care, concern, and connection (Martin, 1994). Capacities for care require challenging hierarchies and forms of domination to ensure there is equal access to the means of reproduction that are the foundation of all life (Federici, 2018). Care and responsibility entail the work of listening, cooperating, discussing, negotiating, and learning to deal with disagreement to build a sense of community. It is a process of shifting power dynamics in favor of those who are “left behind,” marginalized, and most vulnerable. It views caregiving (health care, child care, elder care, care for one’s community, care for the environment, and care for the most vulnerable) and the collective reproduction of life as among the highest purposes of individuals and society.

The work of the Mary Robinson Foundation–Climate Justice (<https://www.mrfcj.org/>) aligns with this *ecojustice story-to-live-by* by showcasing how key principles of climate justice, such as gender equality and equity, sharing benefits and burdens equitably, protecting human rights, building effective partnerships to secure climate justice, and harnessing education for climate stewardship are being enacted across the world. The podcast series Mothers of Invention (<https://www.mothersofinvention.online/>), for example, highlights intergenerational activists whose climate justice gender work intersects with issues related to race, colonialism, social class, and poverty. The podcast offers powerful models of women working for climate justice, such as the Black Lives Matter activist Sarra Tekola, the daughter of a climate refugee from Ethiopia. Tekola calls for community-based solutions to climate change. She connects feminism and climate justice with the Black Lives Matter movement to help people understand and address issues of state violence toward women of color as deeply rooted in particular colonialist legacies. Tekola is a founding member of Women of Color Speak Out (<https://wocspeakout.com/>), a collective of Seattle activists working to educate their community about the climate crisis by connecting climate action to other social movements that help people see that it is possible to dismantle deeply rooted forms of oppression and imagine more sustainable futures. Of note, this story about respect, care, and responsibility is less about altering who we are as humans and more about reclaiming that “our extraordinary capacity for altruism and our remarkably social nature are the central, crucial facts about humankind” (Monbiot, 2017).

2. The Primary Goal of Society Is Human, Ecological, and Planetary Well-Being That Comes With a Recognition of Limits

“The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only task of good government,” wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1809. People

have a right to pursue healthy and meaningful lives, rewarding and purposeful work, and opportunities to develop their full human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Jackson (2021) suggests this is “a story that recognizes the breadth and depth of the human soul . . . that accounts for affinity with tradition as well as our desire for novelty . . . that offers us the tantalizing freedom to become not less, but more fully human” (p. 98). All of these facets of being human are core to flourishing, along with the recognition that humans can only flourish if our natural surroundings and all of life flourishes. The goal of society and government, then, is to ensure life (in all its forms) can flourish. This includes defending the natural environment, resisting the theft, occupation, and destruction of land in order to restore and protect it (Sabzalian, 2019).

The well-being of our ecosystems requires a recognition of limits that are necessary for more-sustainable visions of life. Science-based analyses of the Earth’s environmental limits provide a framework to “define a safe operating space for human societies to develop and thrive” (Steffen et al., 2015, p. 737). Ecological limits also require recognition of ethical and political limits—the need for individuals and societies to learn the self-restraint necessary to control desires and impulses as well as the limits to the influence of private interests and corporate power necessary in a well-functioning democracy (Baildon & Damico, 2019).

The perspectives, practices, and traditions of Indigenous peoples are central to this *ecojustice story*. For example, the First Nations Health Authority in British Columbia highlights a holistic vision of health and wellness based on cultural wisdom, respect, responsibility, and relationships that cut across environmental, social, cultural, and economic determinants of well-being grounded in self-determining communities (<https://www.fnha.ca/>). In this vision, human and ecological well-being is based on recognition of limits and the need for community action to defend and restore land and culture against the destructive stories that people are separate from nature and that the primary goal of society is limitless economic growth. Indigenous well-being is grounded in narratives of place that focus less on rights (to private property, to extract resources and destroy lands, etc.) and more on “individual and collective responsibilities, authority, and obligations, and how that changes based on who you are, where you are, and what you are doing” (Aikau et al., 2015, p. 87). These narratives connect place, one’s sense of identity, and the responsibilities necessary to exercise freedom in ways that recognize our interconnectedness with place and all living things (Hester, 2010).

Our capacity to imagine and enact new stories-To-live-by and different forms of social arrangement within ecological limits is part of what makes us human (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). People are creating alternative visions of the future that are more just and sustainable. These include postgrowth (Jackson, 2021; Prádanos, 2018), postmaterialist (Inglehart, 1977), and postcapitalist (Mason, 2015) imaginaries that challenge dominant growth paradigms of GDP, profit, productivity, and progress. The futurist Hazel

Henderson has advocated ethical markets and research-based indicators that challenge GDP and other traditional economic metrics as measures of progress and well-being. With the Calvert Group, Henderson developed the Calvert-Henderson Quality of Life Indicators that consider twelve domains of life: education, employment, energy, environment, health, human rights, income, infrastructure, national security, public safety, recreation, and shelter (Henderson, et al, 2000). These indicators recognize that human, ecological, and planetary well-being requires new ways of thinking about economics, progress, and our collective future.

Henderson is also the founder of Ethical Markets (ethicalmarkets.com) and has developed a Green Transition Scoreboard to track green investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency, life systems (water, waste, recycling, etc.), green construction, and green corporate research and development to argue that “the green economy [is] growing faster than anyone realizes” (<https://www.ethicalmarkets.com/2017-green-transition-scoreboard-tracks-private-green-investments-at-8-1-trillion/>). Just as the fossil fuel divestment movement is gaining in strength, activist shareholders in U.S. banks are putting forth proposals to stop the financing of new fossil fuel projects (Andreoni, 2022). Along with the efforts in many communities to use renewable energies, electrify transportation, remove carbon, and protect nature, there are hopeful signs that climate denial can be overcome by creating alternative ways of living and organizing our societies. The Postgrowth Encyclopedia (<https://www.postgrowth.org/the-post-growth-encyclopedia>) offers concepts and principles (e.g., buy local, ethical consumption, co-housing, passive solar design), models and indicators (e.g., voluntary simplicity, Gross National Happiness, Genuine Progress Indicators), and activities, programs, and movements (e.g., cycling, transition towns, sociocracy, collaborative consumption) that spotlight the many ways people are reimagining and revitalizing their communities to promote collective well-being within ecological limits.

3. Civic Engagement for the Common Good Is Necessary for More Just and Meaningful Lives and Futures

In contrast to unfettered valorization of individual freedoms and upholding the virtues of competition and a zero-sum story, this *ecojustice story-To-live-by* attaches importance and deep value to collective efforts to improve people’s lives. Again, Indigenous groups have continuously resisted the occupation and destruction of their lands and erasures of culture and sovereignty by settler colonialism, while calling for more holistic and inclusive forms of justice, social and ecological responsibility, and place-based political action (Sabzalian, 2019). Indigenous-led actions and movements led by groups like Idle No More and Indigenous Climate Action highlight this ecojustice story in action. The Indigenous Climate Action website (<https://www.indigenousclimateaction.com/>), for example, provides resources and tools to

ensure Indigenous knowledge and skills serve as drivers of climate justice and brings people together to build relationships and deliberate climate action. The System Change Not Climate Change Project (<https://canadians.org/systemchange>) offers multimedia tools for climate justice organized by the Council of Canadians’ Climate Justice for People and the Planet campaign. The website stemming from the *This Changes Everything* documentary film (Lewis et al., 2015) and book (Klein, 2014) narrates an ecojustice story with a study guide and lesson plans, including a lesson plan called “Reinventing a Clean and Just Economy” (<https://thischangeseverything.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Lesson-Plan-5.pdf>), which explores the story of Henry Red Cloud, who left his steel industry job to start his own solar-power company and create jobs for those living in native communities. In this example, students can learn about how efforts like this yield a synergy of benefits for communities, the economy, and the environment, as Henry aims to help First Nations people achieve energy independence. Similarly, biologist, lyrical science writer, and member of the Potawatomi Nation Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes about the braiding together of healing stories from science, literature, and Indigenous knowledge to imagine and create a different relationship with the world, one based on regenerative, reciprocal relationships.

Civic engagement for the common good is also about revitalizing “the commons,” the natural and cultural systems that must be noncommercialized and nonprivatized—the air, water, plants, animals, woodlands, and forms of knowledge (narratives, aesthetic and craft knowledge, moral norms and traditions, etc.) that are life-sustaining (Bowers, 2004). Federici (2018) calls for a politics of the commons as a collective struggle against the ways people have been divided from each other and the land and for a more democratic vision of the common good and of the future.

This ecojustice story-to-live-by is deeply rooted in youth-led climate activism and civic engagement. Projects such as Zero Hour (<http://thisiszerohour.org/>), the Sunrise Movement (<https://www.sunrisemovement.org/>), Extinction Rebellion (<https://rebellion.earth/>), Fridays for Future (<https://fridaysforfuture.org/>), and School Strike for Climate (<https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com/>) are grassroots efforts to shape climate-related public policy, grounded deeply in what longtime consumer advocate and public intellectual Ralph Nader (2019) calls the moral power of youth. Extinction Rebellion, for example, is an international network dedicated to nonviolent direct action to convince governments to respond swiftly to our climate and ecological emergency. The Sunrise Movement in the United States has also been highly engaged in political action, leading efforts to create a Green New Deal that will confront climate change and economic inequality.

There are also many other groups, organizations, and individuals whose efforts embody an ecojustice story about civic engagement for the common good being an essential part of living a purposeful life. This list includes organizations fighting the climate crisis and promoting social and racial justice, like

350.org, Friends of the Earth, the Indigenous Environmental Network, and Greenpeace, among many others (the Climate Action Network includes more than 1,500 civil organizations in 130 countries); global, multilateral associations like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which has 120 member nations; and the many scientific and citizen communities, institutions, and think tanks across a range of fields (environmentalism, law, human rights, animal welfare, among others) all advocating for or engaging in climate action (Hestres, 2020). One prominent political force has been the fossil fuel divestment movement.

The life's work of Ralph Nader, tireless consumer advocate, environmentalist, political activist, and public intellectual, also embodies the essence of this *ecojustice story-to-live-by*. His laser-beam focus on the abuses of corporate power with clear, straightforward ideas about how individuals and groups can "break through power" to revitalize (and re-democratize) communities is readily accessible across his many books and talks (e.g., Nader, 2016b), and the Ralph Nader Radio Hour podcast, along with resources for youth that chronicle his role in fighting for our rights as citizens and consumers (Panchyk, 2021).

The law, and using the courts to advance climate justice, remains a particularly robust way to put this third *ecojustice story-to-live-by* into practice. Dozens of lawsuits have targeted major fossil fuel giants like BP, ExxonMobil, and Chevron, charging these companies with deceiving the public and exacerbating losses to states and cities or asking that these companies pay affected communities for climate-related costs (Klein & Steffoff, 2021; Sokol, 2020). The United States Government has even been the target of a high-profile lawsuit. In 2015, in *Juliana v. United States*, 21 youth plaintiffs sued the executive branch for policies that have encouraged or supported more fossil fuel extractivism and accelerated climate change, which knowingly violated their rights of life, liberty, and property. There are also efforts from groups like Law Students for Climate Accountability that target the law firms that have worked in service of the fossil fuel industry.

FROM SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF DENIAL TO COLLECTIVE COORDINATION FOR ECOJUSTICE

In her study of a rural Norwegian community during an unusually warm winter, Kari Norgaard (2011) shows how the community did not integrate their climate knowledge into their lives; instead, people opted to distance themselves from responsibility as they asserted the "rightness or goodness" of their actions and maintained "order and security" as they constructed "a sense of innocence in the face of the disturbing emotions associated with climate change" (pp. 11–12). Given the social organization of denial (Zerubavel, 1997, 2002) in this community, climate realities collided with the story of

the community's "goodness" and innocence and its desire to maintain the status quo.

In the United States the social organization of climate denial has been alive and well in education across our professional organizations, national, state- and local-level associations, schools of education in universities, individual school districts, and in our classrooms. More specific to this book's purposes, there has not been a comprehensive reckoning with the climate crisis in literacy and social studies education. In many ways, "our heads have been in the sand too long" (Amigo Fields, 2021).

Yet in May 2022 there is less outright denial of climate science in the United States along with greater recognition that more needs to be done to address the climate crisis. As educators committed to teaching, researching, and learning about climate change dating back to 2008, we are heartened by this development. It is clearly a step in the right direction. Many big and bold steps still need to be taken. Climate denial remains pervasive and protean as climate denial purveyors continue to produce an ever-changing array of texts or stories that inadequately address the climate crisis.

This is why the two of us side with climate scientists like Michael Mann (2021) and Kimberly Nicholas (2021) who continue to assert that while

It's warming
It's us
We're sure
It's bad
We can fix it.

In this book we have made a case that "fixing it" entails a straightforward confrontation with climate denial and dislodging destructive stories that we have been living by. Making climate denial a curricular and instructional priority through inquiry-based investigations can lead to pathways toward *ecojustice stories-To-live-by*. This is one way we, as educators—teachers, administrators, parents, and community members alike—can all do our part in helping "fix it."

Of course, there is no definitive "fix" to climate denial. Climate denial is pervasive and protean as its purveyors continue to promulgate an array of techniques, texts, or stories that inadequately address the climate crisis. This is why each of us will need to play our part and in so doing, know we will not be alone. The three *ecojustice stories-To-live-by* are fundamentally about belonging; each speaks to a deeper recognition that rather than walking, working, and feeling alone, we can "restore our sense of belonging: belonging to ourselves, belonging to our communities, belonging to our localities, belonging to the world" (Monbiot, 2017). As we collectively confront climate denial and advance ecojustice, we can embrace a fundamental truth: We all need each other (McGhee, 2021). This might be the most elemental truth of all.

Appendix

Throughout this book we have highlighted the critically important and inspiring work of many people and projects. This appendix highlights a few web-based resources for understanding climate denial and how to teach about it. Rather than present a more exhaustive list here, we limited ourselves to identifying 10 resources we think can serve as a sturdy foundation and manageable starting point to ground much further exploration and investigation.

UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE DENIAL

DeSmog: <https://www.desmog.com/>

A global organization dedicated since 2006 “to clear the PR pollution that is clouding the science and solutions to climate change.” DeSmog provides consistent and thorough investigative reporting.

Drilled: <https://drillednews.com/podcast-2/>

This “true-crime podcast about climate change” is hosted by Amy Westervelt. We anxiously await the release of each new episode. Just a critical resource.

Inside Climate News: <https://insideclimatenews.org/>

Pulitzer Prize-winning, nonpartisan reporting on the biggest crisis facing our planet. A vital source of investigative reporting.

Covering Climate Now: <https://coveringclimatenow.org/>

This organization was created by journalists to support other journalists and newsrooms in producing informed, compelling, and urgent climate stories. The primary goal is collaboration of news outlets across the globe to cover climate change.

Climate Feedback: <https://climatefeedback.org/>

A global network of scientists that analyzes climate change media coverage to discern trustworthy information.

TEACHING ABOUT CLIMATE DENIAL

Action for the Climate Emergency (formerly Alliance for Climate Education): <https://acespace.org/>

A nonprofit organization that offers educational resources about climate science and climate justice along with leadership training for youth.

Brown University. *Climate Change and Questions of Justice*. <https://www.choices.edu/curriculum-unit/climate-change-questions-justice/>

Klein, N. This Changes Everything: Study guide and lesson plans. <https://thischangeseverything.org/studyguide/>

New York Times. Resources for Teaching About Climate Change with the *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/04/learning/lesson-plans/resources-for-teaching-about-climate-change-with-the-new-york-times.html>

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