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Ontologies of Socioenvironmental Justice

Homelessness and the Production of Social Natures

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Abstract

Everyday experiences of the Hillside residents, individuals facing homelessness while living in a municipal park, provide a context of inquiry for both social and environmental justice. Ethnographic exploration of this sociopolitical and socioenvironmental setting illustrates the ontological complexities surrounding constructions of the nonhuman world, discursive and material realities, social and environmental justice, and homelessness. Ontological examinations of discursive and material nature provide a basis for exploring interrelationships between social and environmental justice, with the concepts becoming inextricably interconnected. The Hillside residents engage with nature in both externalized and relational ways, contesting their perceived statuses as "being homeless." Critical perspectives of social and environmental justice provide a conceptual framework for understanding lived experiences of homelessness under the social, political, and economic forces of capitalism.

Keywords: *discourse; epistemology; ethnography; materiality; political ecology*

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"[The Hillside] ain't nature at all. Nature is for rich people to go hike around and get the hell out of the city, to get away from their jobs and lives and kids and TV and shit. Nature ain't really for tramps like us…"

—Max, Hillside resident

"Seems like nature to me."

—Keith, Hillside resident

Introduction

The "Hillside residents," as I have come to know them over the years, live in areas that are legally and discursively understood as public space. Despite the Hillside residents understanding these spaces as "home," these individuals are, to certain degrees, unwelcome on the Hillside; without access to private spaces to which they can retreat, the Hillside residents constantly face threats of displacement from police and authorities. Similarly, the Hillside residents live much of their lives in what is commonly understood as nature, in this case a public municipal park with manicured grass ballfields, swing sets, tennis courts, and evenly spaced shade trees. The park is adjacent to open space, where wild grasses, oak trees, and the topographic features of a steep slope provide visual protection from park visitors, commuter traffic, legal authorities, and much of the social interaction commensurate with urban settings. The park and the adjacent open space provide sweeping vistas, many of the necessities of living, and often a sense of solitude, despite the sights and sounds of vehicles and nearby factories constantly refining extracted fossil fuels.

Through existence and experience, the Hillside residents dismantle the socially constructed inaccuracies of common nature-society bifurcations. Their presence in and around this landscape calls into question common narratives of parks and open space, where human presence in parks should be transitory. Placed into the broader context of living through homelessness, this study primarily concerns a community of individuals who, lacking adequate housing elsewhere and for a wide variety of reasons, have chosen to live and exist in a municipal park and the open, unbuilt spaces in nearby landscapes, in areas commonly understood as "public nature." Common discursive stereotypes label the Hillside residents as "being homeless," complete with connotations of laziness, mental instability, impoverished living, drug abuse, and panhandling. However, from their own perspectives, the Hillside residents conversely see themselves through humane, agency-filled, and justice-oriented perspectives, where they are politically attuned and fully contributing members of society, devoid of the passive victimization that is often associated with individuals perceived to "be homeless" (e.g., Amster, 2008; Liebow, 1993; Mitchell, 2003; Ruddick, 1996).

This research leverages the lived experiences of individuals facing homelessness to explicitly and empirically question meanings of "nature" and the regularly unquestioned systems of knowledge that produce(d) these meanings. Here, I develop the concept of *social natures* as a way of critically understanding human relationships with nonhuman actors or elements that contribute to the world in which we live. Bringing forward specific experiences from a 16-month critical ethnography, I present the Hillside residents and their complex understandings of "nature," a prompt for recognizing the heavily *ontological* basis of this socioenvironmental relationship.[1] The Hillside residents, having free will, choice, and agency, are also victims of social injustices *and* environmental injustices, the separation of which can be mapped to common ontological un-

derstandings of the nonhuman world. This research, a philosophical argument that is contextualized through data, argues that leisure research in general, and research engaging with social and environmental justice, specifically, should further attend to the ontological assumptions that foundationalize much of our historical and contemporary inquiries.

The critical argument at the heart of this research considers how the Hillside residents understand their complex experiences of living in nature. The complexity of the question of "homelessness" will be taken up in this article, but it is helpful here to acknowledge that the Hillside residents do not own houses or have access to private property. Instead, they spend a majority of their lives outside of built environments, socializing in the outdoors, cooking on small stoves or open fires, and sleeping in tents, tarps, or caves. They have access to many social services, but eschew local shelters in favor of the relative social and spatial freedoms of the Hillside. Living on the Hillside is a social justice issue for many reasons, including these individuals' daily interactions with systemic poverty, stigmatization, and lack of health care (Mitchell, 2003). Additionally, living on the Hillside is an environmental justice issue for myriad reasons, including the exclusion from environmental decision-making processes (Harrison, 2011), the constant threat of displacement (Holifield, 2012), and the contested ability to define the places in which they live (Stewart, 2013), a space that is commonly understood as a leisure space.

Understanding the Hillside residents' perspectives of the world, and particularly their relationships with the unbuilt landscapes in which they live, supports an analysis of particular ontologies that help critically align social justice and environmental justice movements. Further, inquiry into perspectives of nature takes on increasing importance with impending environmental crises (Buell, 2003). Focusing on the present ways in which nature is (re)produced on the Hillside and elsewhere is important because the material transformations that constitute this process generate both social and environmental consequences that transcend the boundaries of the production site itself. Our social world helps construct nature, just as nature helps construct our social lives and relationships. This argument is developed through an ontological exploration of social natures and the critical and poststructural epistemologies of political ecology. This philosophical perspective is mapped onto the social and environmental landscape of the Hillside, deconstructing homelessness and the Hillside residents' emic perceptions of "nature," a contested construct that is developed as being both discursive and material. I conclude with a return to justice-oriented ontologies that necessarily incorporates socioenvironmental elements.[2]

Social Natures

Contextualizing peoples' relationships with the world around us has been an avenue of academic inquiry for millennia. A consistent nature-society dichotomy dominates much of our present discourse, a construction with ancestral roots in Enlightenment thinkers such as Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Boyle, Newton, Kant, and others (Castree, 2001; DeLuca, 1999). These prominent intellectuals are principle architects of modernist establishment thought that defines

[1]Considerations of ontology are gaining momentum across academic disciplines. A recent issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (volume 26, number 6), devoted specifically to envisioning "post-qualitative research," features numerous articles positioning ontology as an important arena for critical inquiry and scholarship. For an overview of ontological engagement with entanglement theory, the mangle, assemblages, rhizomes, materialist feminism, and other aspects, see Lather and St. Pierre (2013) and Hekman (2010).

[2]Much of the critical ontological argument developed in this manuscript stems from previous analyses of the Hillside residents and their positioning vis-à-vis socioenvironmental justice (see Rose, 2013).

our era: "the separation of nature and culture, science and politics, the human and the nonhuman… The modern constitution is rigidly dichotomous. It allows only for entities that fall on one side or the other of the nature/culture dichotomy" (Hekman, 2010, pp. 18–19). This modernist separation has deep influences on a variety of ontological conceptions.

One of the earliest contributors to our current dichotomy was Descartes, who struggled with reconciling his embodied senses, showing the sun crossing the sky, circling the Earth, with the reason and science of Copernicus and Galileo, who demonstrated that such sensory impulses were logically incorrect. Descartes' body told one story, while his mind informed him quite differently. In particular, this Cartesian dualism alleged that the mind and body are distinct entities existing independent of one another, culminating in Descartes' famous philosophical dicta: "*Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am)." The mind, the *cogito*, the knowing subject, intangible yet superior, is above the body, the mechanistic, material, and subservient housing for the mind. Thought, therefore, exists outside of time and space, lacks a (spatial) location, and is unobservable to outside investigators, while the body (and, subsequently, all things material) is measurable and can be investigated and experimented upon. Cartesian dualistic thinking has led to the idea that the body is a machine, the mind is only an attribute of humans, nonhuman living beings (as well as all nonliving things and systems) have no mind, and, therefore, are machines that can be objectified, studied, consumed, exploited, and extracted. The human mind is not only at the center of, but prior to, all other categories of ontological existence. This "machine" view of the material world—one that provides understandings of the subject-object polarization that still permeates so much of contemporary thought—has had wide ranging moral and ethical consequences. Descartes' logics have also had significant implications for the ways in which the processes of inquiry are conducted, having "remarkable staying power in modernism and in conventional social science" (St. Pierre, 2013, p. 463). Nature, in this line of thought, is constructed as the object to society's subject (DeLuca, 1999; Plumwood, 1991). "Nature," then, has two radically different meanings in contemporary discourse: It is both the essential quality of something, but it also refers to the environment (Williams, 1980).

As nature is not a thinking being, it is, therefore, othered, objectified, and separated from all that is human (Gerber, 1997; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). Modernist/Western conceptualizations of nature view it as a unitary entity, entirely separate from or even antithetical to culture (Evernden, 1992). The natural world being separate from the human world is so prominent that it anchors much of Western ontology (Castree & Braun, 2001; Gerber, 1997; Haraway, 1991; Plumwood, 1991). This nature-society dichotomy slowly yet steadily transformed from Enlightenment-era philosophical dicta to contemporary behavioral and material actualities. The result is that the nonhuman world—nature, the environment, ecosystems, wilderness, etc.—is largely perceived in a way that does not have a human component to it (Castree, 2001; Kates, 1987): All that is human is completely and irreversibly separate from all that is nonhuman, with little room for grey area or overlap. "Nature is external to, and different from, society" (Castree, 2001, p. 6). A binary has been socially created, even if there is no acceptable ecological explanation that concurs with this discursive dichotomy (Evernden, 1992; Harvey, 1993). Epistemological perspectives of nature—how we come to know nature—lead to even more important ontological perspectives of nature, concerning the existence, being, and reality of the world in which we live.

The seemingly omnipresent binary between people and the world around us is a central question for academics: "What is and ought to be our relationship to the natural world?" (Kates, 1987, p. 532). Critical scholars have long explored this relationship, as Marx noted nearly 150

years ago in Volume 1 of *Capital* that ecological conditions and processes do not operate outside of social processes. Contemporary critical perspectives on our nature-society dualism have led to understandings of nature as a social construction rather than as an objective entity to be counted, weighed, and measured (Cronon, 1996b; Demeritt, 2002; Gerber, 1997; Proctor, 1998). Harvey (1996) argues that the production of nature is dialectical, that nature exists in an "internal" relation with society. From this "social natures" perspective, it is society that fabricates our ideas concerning nature and produces the very substance of the multiple, contingent, and contextualized natures we experience (Castree & Braun, 2001). The contention is that "nature is a human idea, with a long and complicated cultural history which has led different human beings to conceive of the natural world in very different ways" (Cronon, 1996a, p. 20).

More recently, studies have sought to critically and empirically understand relationships between the human and nonhuman worlds, illustrating the complex ontological interpenetration of the social and the material (e.g., Kaika, 2005; Karvonen, 2011; Rajan & Duncan, 2013; Sundberg, 2011). Further, there are new arenas of biopolitical concern about how the contaminated nonhuman environment is changing the very nature of humans (Mansfield, 2012; Robbins, 2007), and subsequently, what it means to be human. While nature is transforming humans, it is also clear that humans are reciprocally transforming nature. These studies illustrate the unstable status of what is discursive and what is material, what is human and what is nature, with the tacit acknowledgement that the dualistic status of these categories is ontologically problematic.

Forests, streams, mountains, valleys, and charismatic megafauna that populate many mainstream notions of nature clearly have material properties, but it is helpful to simultaneously acknowledge that "...all claims about nature are discursively mediated. Knowledge and language are the tools we use to make sense of a natural world that is both different from us and yet which we are a part of" (Castree, 2001, p. 12). Nature obviously exists in a material way, and to "deny the dynamic reality of the nonhuman world is also misleading and potentially destructive" (Spirn, 1996, p. 112). However, there is not some "innocent, prediscursive metalanguage for us to use to describe that reality" (Braun & Wainwright, 2001, p. 45). A helpful example is water. Water itself is not socially produced, of course, but the powers and effects of water are politically and economically mobilized and socially appropriated to produce and reflect positions of social power. Water is biophysically vital to life on our planet, while also maintaining deep social meaning and cultural value, internalizing powerful relations, both socioeconomic and physical (Swyngedouw, 1996). Water is discursively constructed in that there is no place external to language in which water can be known; "water" is the outcome of practices of signification, not their immediate cause. From this perspective, nature (as seen through the example of water) is a subjective effect of power (through discourse), and neither nature nor society is a separate or stable category of being. Rather, nature (and also society) exists in partiality through discursive meanings we place upon it; nature cannot pre-exist its own construction (Braun, 2002; Castree, 2014; Haraway, 1992), and we must acknowledge and critique the social, political, and ecological histories that inform our contemporary notions of what nature means to us individually and collectively.

The implications for moving past nature-society dualisms are far-reaching, particularly in language. Language, in part, constitutes the world by providing us with concepts that structure the world. The description of something being "natural" becomes problematic, as essence and environment (Williams, 1980) are simultaneously confused, conflated, and inextricably woven together. The word "natural" is often attached to concepts that ultimately imply that they are free from human interference and, that if humans were to interfere, the object in question would be

less natural, downgraded or damaged from the way it is "supposed" to be. Such a stance demonizes humans, is problematic, and is often inaccurate. "Many popular ideas about the environment are premised on the conviction that nature is a stable, holistic, homeostatic community capable of preserving its natural balance more or less indefinitely if only humans can avoid disturbing it" (Cronon, 1996b, p. 24). Nonhuman nature is increasingly understood as brute, uninterrupted essential materiality rather than as already interrupted and interpreted materiality that we must seek to further understand and explain (Hekman, 2010). The only agency given to humans in this conceptualization is one of getting out of the way; such discourses are consonant with many contemporary environmental movements. "Getting out of the way," however, feeds these already present nature-society dualisms. Dualistic thinking purports the common refrain that if humans can just stay away from nature, most environmental problems will "naturally" solve themselves (Cronon, 1996b), a problematic and ecologically incoherent discourse (Castree, 2001). Our nature-society discourses must shift attention away from efforts to "save" external nature from humans to examining processes through which social natures are continuously made and remade, and with what consequences. As various environmental crises (climate change, forest depletion, desertification, topsoil loss, fresh water scarcity, species loss, etc.) become more and more pressing for both humans and the living and nonliving systems around us, coming to terms with our language, our understandings, and their material implications takes on pressing importance. We must understand societal influences on ecologies, and vice versa, rather than seeing nonhuman nature as an independent entity (Bakker & Bridge, 2006). Imagining and working toward survivable human futures necessitates an understanding of the politics of those generative processes that contributed toward the social productions of nature (Castree, 2014).

A social natures ontological perspective, importantly, rejects the seemingly common notion that there is a "natural" human determinant or an essential fact of existence that precedes any discursive formation of the subject; social, economic, and political processes significantly contribute to the ontological reality of the subject. Sorting out which elements of our lives are natural and which elements are social/cultural is futile and counterproductive, long-held ontological detritus of modernism (Latour, 1993). Critical researchers in the social, cultural, psychological, and educational domains require sophisticated understandings of the nature of knowledge, or epistemology, realizing that "knowledge is always in process, developing, culturally specific, and power-inscribed" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 689).

Political ecology is a way of knowing that examines relationships between social, political, and economic factors and ecological conditions and changes, integrating ecological and social sciences with political economy (Robbins, 2012). Woven together, political ecology presupposes that these factors form uneven and unjust material and discursive settings (Escobar, 1996), an important critical stance. Further, generating environmental knowledges for the promotion of justice is an explicit goal of political ecology (Forsyth, 2008). Political ecology, through both critical and poststructural lenses (Escobar, 1996; Forsyth, 2008), has the potential to enhance democratic content of socioenvironmental constructions by identifying strategies through which a more equitable distribution of social power and a more inclusive mode of discursive environmental production can be achieved.

While epistemologies have been interrogated at greater length (e.g., Neimanis, Castleden, & Rainham, 2012), ontologies remain largely unquestioned (Hekman, 2010), giving vital importance to social natures perspectives. Ontologically, the very materiality of a subject is in part constituted by its discursively produced components (Butler, 1990; Hekman, 2010). For instance, the previous example of water illustrates that the molecular structure provides necessary material

sustenance for (human and nonhuman) life, but this objectivity fails to capture water's powerful symbolic meanings (health, identity, purity, etc.), its geopolitical importance, and its variegated cultural significances. In fact, understanding water (or nature, more broadly) without the combined discursive and material constructions fails to adequately capture the entity in question. This hybrid social natures ontology not only makes room for both discursive and material components of subjectivity, but in fact *requires* both components (Castree, 2001). In such an ontology, "the social is not separated from the natural according to [this] dichotomy, but rather they continually interpenetrate each other" (Hekman, 2010, pp. 14–15). This type of hybrid ontological rationalization disrupts long standing dualisms between ontological essentialists and social constructionists (Swyngedouw, 1996). "While the essentialist holds that the natural is repressed by the social, the constructionist maintains that the natural is produced by the social" (Torres, Miron, & Inda, 1999, p. 6). Neither polar ontological perspective is productive.

There is an essentialist temptation, particularly from positivist and postpositivist accounts, to fix theory against some objective materiality. "It seems obvious that in order to effect political change we should be able to say that this is the way things *really are* with no ambiguity. But it is a temptation we must resist" (Hekman, 2010, p. 105). As Spivak's (1988) notion of strategic essentialism asserts, there is no "natural" order, or essence, but rather politically and rhetorically, essentialism is a discursive means to an end. Strategic essentialists argue that the use of essentialism for useful ends depends on who is using it, how it is being used, and for what purpose. Essentialism, when used strategically, can be a powerful and productive tool for the dispossessed. Interrogating essentialism does not necessarily entail dismissing it entirely. In the context of social and environmental justice movements, strategic essentialism is constantly invoked to move forward specific political aims, but it is typically done in a manner that fails to acknowledge the interpenetrative constructionist (discursive) and essentialist (material) elements.

A more complex ontology is helpful in understanding discursive-material dualities, subject-object relations, human relationships with nature, and, ultimately, connections between social and environmental justice. A strict social construction account is inadequate due to its loss of the material world: "Its inability to bring the material dimension into theory and practice, its inability to talk about anything except language, imposes an unacceptable constraint on theory" (Hekman, 2010, p. 2). However, there is an equally strong conviction that "we must not return to the approach to the material embodied in modernity. Modernity was all about matter. For modernists the aim of philosophy was to get matter right, to develop concepts that mirror nature" (Hekman, 2010, p. 2). "Weak ontology" proposes both a rejection of the strong ontology of modernity and a rejection of discursive relativism, but its applicability is greatest in the realm of political relations (White, 2000). In the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, our ontological (and critical) challenge is not to discursively reject the material in favor of the discursive, but to better understand material reality, part of which is discursively constructed. We must move beyond the ontological dualisms that have plagued modernity: nature and culture, human and nonhuman, the discursive and the material. The sociopolitical world in which we all live is, in fact, material, a point embodied in the experiences of the Hillside residents. The Hillside itself, a site of lived experiences of homelessness, is a helpful setting for contextualizing the ontological re-envisioning of society, nature, discourse, and materiality.

Homelessness and the Hillside

Over the duration of this ethnography, between two and 24 individuals live(d)[3] on the Hillside, most of whom are male. I formed meaningful, often intimate relationships with many

of these individuals, as they allowed me access to minute details of their daily lives, thoughts, and experiences. There were very few unifying narratives that helped to explain these individuals' unique life circumstances and I found it difficult to make broad generalizations about them. Common sociodemographic descriptors, such as age, education, vocation, religious affiliation, drug and alcohol use, mental and physical health, criminal history, and political ideology, all varied widely across the Hillside residents. Many, though not all, of the Hillside residents work(ed) in both formal and informal day labor settings, providing inconsistent and often illegally low wages. A daily commute into the city enabled access to both day labor possibilities and social services provided by government, nonprofit, and religious agencies. The Hillside residents often spent their working hours in the city five or six days of the week, with the spaces of the Hillside reserved for socializing, eating, resting, and sleeping on Sundays and weekday evenings. The individuals living on the Hillside did not identify as a community in traditional anthropological or sociological senses, in that they did not have a collective identity, a common understanding of purpose or meaning, identified shared values, and there was no formal social structure of living. For this reason, I tried to maintain a perspective of them as group of singular individuals rather than as a unified collective. However, some generalities existed, as most Hillside residents were constantly accepting of each other and of me, allowing me to eat, sleep, live, and interact with them at length.

Germane to the research arguments presented here, one of the few commonalities across the Hillside residents was that they did not consider themselves to be homeless and did not use the word "homeless" to describe their experiences. A poignant encounter encapsulates this perspective, during my first few months on the Hillside:[4]

> 'I'm not fucking homeless!' Wayne barked emphatically as we walked quickly through the park on a cold December morning. I had just asked him if he would participate in an interview so I could better understand his experiences of living on the Hillside. His voice dropped and slowed, but remained clear and forceful, 'I don't know if you think you're some smart sociologist or something, but I'm not talking to anyone about being homeless, because I wouldn't know nothing about that. I'm not homeless.'

While Wayne's statements and their multiple implications warrant more detailed inquiry, the construct of homelessness, clearly, also needs a critical unpacking to better understand the various problematics associated with it.

Homelessness is a complex sociopolitical and academic topic, in part because of the concept's seemingly inherent uncertainty. While those lacking access to private space are often referenced as being homeless, defining homelessness in any way is fraught with problems (Fitzgerald, Shelley, & Dail, 2001). Numerous questions highlight ambiguities in researching and addressing

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[3]The verb tense for the individuals living on the Hillside is intentionally ambiguous because some of the individuals in this study have left the Hillside and now reside elsewhere, while others remain. My ethnographic experience is presented here in the past tense, even though my critical engagement with this community continues, to some degree. Secondly, the performative act of writing more permanently locates the Hillside residents materially and discursively, when in fact their status on the Hillside remains constantly contested by the threat of displacement. Lastly, this ambiguous verb tense emphasizes the fluidity of existence on the Hillside, as it also does with the fluidity of the contested nature of homelessness.

[4]Ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) constituted the majority of the data developed during this research. Sixteen months of ethnographic immersion—to varying degrees—produced field notes that were analyzed and synthesized into various themes, including perceptions of nature.

homelessness. Is homelessness a single night spent outside of private space? Is it an exhibited behavior or set of behaviors? Is it a condition associated with extreme poverty, mental health issues, or itinerant lifestyles? Further, many people who spend nights outdoors, on streets, or in shelters might not self-identify as homeless for a variety of reasons, raising questions of agency as to self-identification or researcher identification (Ruddick, 1996). And many researcher definitions of homelessness exclude duration, indicating that a person who spends a single night without access to private property might be "homeless," but has access to formal housing (or private space) for the other 364 nights of the year.

A larger epistemological problem is the linguistic differentiation between "being homeless" and "homelessness." In popular discourse and political rhetoric, describing an individual as "being homeless," much like the descriptor "homeless person," serves to individualize homelessness and centralize the word homeless as a primary descriptor of a person's existence. "Homelessness," on the other hand, points more toward a condition that society has produced, one that is (perhaps unjustly) enacted upon particular individuals and groups (Amster, 2008). While differentiations between homeless as a descriptor and homelessness as a condition are helpful considerations for thinking, speaking, and writing, these discursive constructions have material consequences, as social policy and individuals' sociopolitical statuses are often closely aligned with these phrases.

Typically, homelessness and individuals living through homelessness are studied as objective sociological problems, and the dynamics of power on the part of these individuals receive less attention (Arnold, 2004). In this sense, typical accounts portray individuals facing homelessness as either defective units to be repaired or removed, or as unwitting victims of local sociopolitical circumstance; both tactics (perhaps unintentionally) result in stripping individuals facing homelessness of agency, autonomy, and, potentially, rights (Mitchell, 2003). Denying individuals who face homelessness their capacity to exercise choice and construct their identities is to deny them status as full human agents, and to deny them justice (Arnold, 2004). Further, typical portrayals of homelessness often overlook various actualities of life, where people are not simply submissive victims or irrational subjects, but are active and intentional choice makers in areas as basic to survival as food, shelter, and hygiene through numerous encounters with authorities, merchants, and community members (Liebow, 1993). "Far from being dupes—impassive in their stigmatization—the homeless constantly and consciously negotiate these meanings, attempting to transform their relationship to those around them" (Ruddick, 1996, p. 61). Such is certainly the case for the residents of the Hillside. From a critical perspective, the Hillside residents are most in need of a politics of justice that serves their intertwined material needs and their feelings of being discursively produced in an unproductive manner.

The spaces the Hillside residents call home, a municipal park and adjacent unbuilt areas, help provide context for a social natures ontological paradigm. Municipal parks contribute substantially to the sociopolitical ecology of the urban landscape (Brown, 2008), where the parks become part of "networks of interwoven sociospatial processes that are simultaneously local and global, human and physical, cultural and organic" (Swyndegouw & Heynen, 2003, p. 899). Unbuilt spaces are important parts of metabolic processes that support (human and nonhuman) life, combining infinitely interconnected environmental and social processes (Latour, 1993; 2004). Stereotypical constructions often situate municipal parks as sites of recreation and social gatherings. However, under neoliberal practices of the past three decades (Harvey, 2005), parks are increasingly regulated by municipalities and police concerns (Low, Taplin, & Scheld, 2005), requiring a reconsideration of parks in light of social and environmental justice (Mitchell, 2003). For individuals such as the Hillside residents, parks are not only spaces for recreation and so-

cial interactions; they are spaces for meeting some of their most basic needs, including resting, sleeping, urinating and defecating, and storing possessions. Parks are traditionally considered leisure settings, but individuals facing homelessness complicate this framing when many non-leisure needs are met in parks (Brown, 2008). Perhaps unintentionally but ironically, such parks' management and regulation may be the greatest threat to each of these individual's maintenance of self, as the fear of displacement was constant for individuals living on the Hillside. From the Hillside residents' perspectives, the materiality of the parks support(ed) their sustenance, but the meanings that are ascribed to the parks are nothing if not discursively produced. "The cultural landscapes represented by parks differ from physical landscapes in that they harbor socially constructed or symbolic meanings not necessarily rooted in physical space" (Brown, 2008, p. 591). The Hillside residents' ontological positionings of parks, open space, and nature help illustrate the material and the discursive construction of these landscapes.

Nature and Place on the Hillside

For the Hillside residents, understanding the place in which they live(d) is, from their perspectives, one form of creating a more just world. As Stewart (2013) asserts, "Working for social justice is about legitimizing a group of people as having a stake in the way a place is defined" (p. 190). Place, in this sense, differs from the more neutral notion of space in that places are where meanings are made through experiences (Tuan, 1977), and place-based meaningfulness emerges as a product of people interacting in shared landscapes (Rouse, 2002). These interpretations of landscapes and productions of place help form identities, further supporting emotional attachments or even dependencies upon place (Brown, 2008).

Over the months that I spent living and interacting with the Hillside residents, I noticed their intimate connections to the place they call(ed) home. Tents, tarps, caves, and constructed habitations of plants and sticks were maintained, adjusted, and beautified to better meet Hillside residents' needs of having the most comfortable possible home, as well as an aesthetically pleasing setting. At the entrance to Jake's tent was a rubber mat with the word "WELCOME" embedded in it, and Keith and Max kept extra lawn chairs outside of their tents as a spot for fellow Hillside residents and visitors to sit and commune. Simon even maintained an extra bed in his sleeping area for the times when his friends visited the Hillside. For the residents, the Hillside is/was not just where they reside(d), but their *home*, complete with material modifications of their possessions and the local environment to better accommodate themselves and visitors.

Beyond the material modifications made to their immediately local environments, the Hillside residents had an increased awareness of the social and material aspects of the Hillside, the place they work(ed), live(d), and play(ed).[5] The Hillside residents rarely needed lighting for comfortably moving around at night, a point of differentiation between us that was made abundantly clear to me on the nights early in my ethnography, when I had no headlamp, stumbling clumsily on uneven rocks, hard pack snow, and steep, cobbly slopes. Throughout the seasons, Jake, Keith, Wayne, Simon, Max, and others constantly compared the birds, snakes, and other wildlife they had recently seen, a common point of ongoing ecology-based conversations. A highlight of this exchange was Keith's face-to-face encounter with a curious mountain lion. "Yeah, this whole place is covered in panther piss," he told us with a chuckle. "You can smell it, and you know when they've been near. I thought I knew them well enough to know when to stay away, but that one

[5]Di Chiro (1996) not only deconstructs objectified notions of nature, but also provides a working definition, claiming that the environment is the place you live, the place you work, and the place you play. Novotny (2000) continued this definition, bringing it into an explicitly environmental justice framework.

last night caught me off guard." This incident illustrated Keith's intimate, sensory-based environmental knowledge of the place. This sense of place can be attributed to the Hillside residents' sedimentary accumulation of familiarity that comes with repeated interactions with a particular landscape. Experiences with a particular place—the Hillside—are repeatedly layered upon one another, and both the intensity of knowledge and connection with that place are heightened over time and with repeated layering.

A space that might commonly be considered "nature," the Hillside residents often also understood it as home. This contestation over what they considered nature was articulated and developed during a conversation I had with Keith and Max. Sitting in decaying lawn chairs between their tents, looking across vast distances, I asked them if the Hillside is nature. The two men, both in their fifties, who are/were argumentative, reactionary, and multiyear residents of the Hillside, surprisingly considered the question silently before responding thoughtfully.

> Keith: What do you mean, nature? Of course it's nature up here. Don't it look like nature to you? Don't you see the grasses and the dirt and the trails and all? I built that trail. The birds and the critters? All this open space out here? It sure as hell is nature to me.
>
> Max: Hell, naw. It's not nature; this is my home. I live here. I own this place. This is my space, that's his space, and [pointing] that's his space over there. Each of us has our own place up here. We own it. But it ain't nature at all. Nature is for rich people to go hike around and get the hell out of the city, to get away from their jobs and lives and kids and TV and shit. Nature ain't really for tramps like us, but I used to go out to the desert in Arizona when I was younger… That was nature. This here is where I live, not nature.
>
> Keith: Well I don't care what you think, this seems like nature to me. It is nature. This is where I live, and I like it. I like it lot. I've lived here a long time. It's part of who I am. I like being outside and just thinking about things. That's the only reason I'm up here, so I can keep my thoughts going, be close to the man upstairs. I wouldn't be up here if it weren't nature up here. Otherwise, I'd head down to the shelter in the city with those other animals down there.

This brief interaction between Keith and Max illustrates multiple dilemmas of life on the Hillside, as well as in the contested constructions of nature and place. Keith saw nature as being intimately connected to his identity, to his daily experiences, and to his connections to place. Max, alternatively, articulated nature to be the space of the bourgeois recreational elite (e.g., Erickson, 2011; Simon & Alagona, 2013), as a leisure space of escape. Max also articulated nature as being antithetical to home, and antithetical to notions of private property. Max's understanding of nature (in this case) aligns most closely with the Cartesian dualistic construction that views nature as other, distanced, and objective. Keith's perspective, contrastingly, sees nonhuman nature as connected, intimate, relational, and, at least in part, discursively (re)produced. Ontologically, then, Keith aligned (in this case) with a social natures perspective (Braun & Wainwright, 2001; Castree, 2001), where nature's undeniable materiality ("grasses and the dirt and the trails") was balanced with a relational meaning-making and social construction perspective ("This seems like nature to me… It's part of who I am."). Many Hillside residents did not remove or separate human experiences from the place they call(ed) both "home" and "nature;" the human experience became embedded in the discursive production of the Hillside, as well as in the very mate-

riality of the place itself.

The Hillside residents, through action, discourse, and material existence, acutely pull apart problematics of dominant nature–society dualities. It is their very presence that confronts mainstream conceptualizations of park, open space, and leisure normativity, engaging with these landscapes in non-normative ways. The Hillside residents have many of the possessions of outdoor recreationists, with camping stoves, dome tents, flashlights, and synthetic sleeping bags, but their purpose for being on the Hillside differs tremendously from standard contemporary outdoor recreation perspectives. Conventional understandings of "leisure" do not adequately capture the complexity of the lived experiences and the daily performances that are played out by the Hillside residents and their interactions with the socioenvironmental world.

Individuals living on the Hillside, facing homelessness in their everyday practices of living in nature, exist at the material, discursive, and epistemological tensions that characterize faulty separations of social and environmental justice. Wayne's emphatic pronouncement that he is "not fucking homeless" is a basic articulation that he and other individuals living on the Hillside actively contest mainstream constructions of homelessness and living in nature. Wayne, in a perspective consonant with many other Hillside residents, continued to clarify that he is not without a home, even if his home is found within what most people consider nature. His life and his experience on the Hillside directly contest dualistic constructions of nature and society, and he demanded that his subjectivity not be reduced to something he viewed as narrow as mere homelessness.

The Hillside Residents and Socioenvironmental Justice

What, then, might justice look like for the Hillside residents? I asked that question directly, and received a multitude of answers, varying from immediately local solutions (e.g., "keep the damn cops out of here") to global and structural tradeoffs (e.g., "we need to tear down the whole system"). Perhaps the most thoughtful responses to that question were the ones that could be summed up by "I don't know," or "I'm not sure." Max's pondering of this question, however, provides some insight. On a cool spring morning, his rough hand pulled on his graying beard and looked off toward the pumping smokestacks of an oil refinery as he pulled a deep breath from his hand rolled cigarette:

> I wish some things were different. But if they're different in favor of me, then they're not going to work for someone else, you know? It'd be great if we could all get together on this and decide, as a people, to make shit better. I don't want to tear up the planet, but we got to use some of it if we're going to survive. But you can't fix this mess because people want stuff, more and more and more. The Rich Bitches [nearby neighbors in expensive houses] don't want us here because they want more: more views, more hiking trails, more open space, more space from tramps, whatever. More. Who's going to tell them no? You? Me? They get to call the shots. We live closer to the factories [oil refineries] because they don't want to… It's the system we got, and I don't know how to change it.

The "system," in this case, is the capitalist political economy and its various social, environmental, and political consequences, including homelessness. For Max, an explicit focus on social justice issues (income inequality, homelessness, etc.) insufficiently addresses global structural crises, as does an exclusive focus on environmental justice issues (access to open space, proximity to factory pollution, etc.). The Hillside and its residents are visceral sites of social justice and

environmental justice alignment, indicating that these two avenues should recognize their inseparability. The often false separation of social and environmental justice has been widely critiqued as narrowly focused, ecologically impossible, and antithetical toward a productive envisioning of sociopolitical and socioenvironmental relations (Cachelin, 2010; Di Chiro, 1996; Harvey, 1996). Social justice cannot exist without environmental justice and environmental justice cannot exist without social justice.

An ontological reckoning of nature is vital to the future of social and environmental justice. Coming to understand the multiple, unstable definitions of the nonhuman world would enable social justice movements to recognize the deeply embedded notion of nature in all we do, and simultaneously enable environmental justice movements to focus on more subjective notions of nature as being a reflection of ourselves as much as it is an objective entity to weigh, count, and measure. Beyond academic semantics of the names of various justice movements, environmental justice groups' "... redefinition of environment has enabled them to forge links with groups concerned with race, class, and rural issues" (DeLuca, 1999, p. 240). Justice movements of all sorts must redefine and expand "nature" as they proceed.[6]

The instability of the socially constructed categorizations of nature and society is at the heart of separating social and environmental justice movements. A more helpful theoretical and practical implementation of a single justice movement might be called "justice" or "socioenvironmental justice" (Heynen, Kaika, & Swyngedouw, 2006; Rose, 2013; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003; c.f., Adeola, 2009; Mvondo, 2006). Nature-society binaries must be rendered ontologically obsolete, as "the merging of social justice and environmental justice interests assumes that people are an integral part of what should be understood as the environment" (Di Chiro, 1996, p. 301). This socioenvironmental justice movement—both political and academic—must be ontologically grounded not at the poles of the essentialist-constructionist spectrum but at the nature–society interstices and interpenetrations, providing the greatest promise for social and ecological stability, rights, and democratic organization at local and global levels (Castree, 2001). Explicitly social justice and explicitly environmental justice groups can both acknowledge that there is a critical need to productively change both material *and* discursive conditions for their particular cause at hand, and that sacrificing the material for the discursive, or the discursive for the material, would be an inadequate arrangement. Echoing Marx's claim that the social cannot be extracted from any political or material situation, Harvey (1996) emphasizes, "All sociopolitical projects are ecological projects and vice versa" (p. 174). Harvey (1996) further points to the futility of separating social and environmental justice, illustrating that, through a Marxist perspective, a politics of class would likely subsume those specific politics of race, gender, orientation, or any environmental-specific cause. Socioenvironmental justice concerns, then, cannot be fully addressed until there is a substantial re-working of the highly unjust dominion of capital accumulation. Critically, socioenvironmental analysis and policy should be reframed toward addressing the problems of the most vulnerable individuals and communities (Forsyth, 2008), such as those living in the tenuous margins of the Hillside. One's own epistemological disposition notwithstanding—be it Marxist, poststructuralist, feminist, critical race, Freirean, or otherwise—any critical perspective acknowledges that justice-focused movements cannot address any single descriptor or avenue for justice without altering all others.

[6]Reconceptualizing nature contests previous constructions of nature by mainstream environmental groups who position it as "pristine" or "wilderness," constructs that often serve the entrenched interests of dominant races, classes, and genders. "Environmental justice groups challenge not only industrialism, but white wilderness and mainstream environmentalism" (DeLuca, 1999, p. 235).

Aligning social and environmental justice movements is a critically productive path for activists, citizens, and scholars. Environmental justice movements often align with groups focused on social justice issues, but an important ontological reconceptualization of nature is helpful in this alignment process. Stereotypically, environmental justice groups focus on objectified notions of natural systems, and social justice groups imply that their causes lack any connection to the surrounding nonhuman entities and systems in which they (materially) live, work, and play. These differing ontologies of nature are both problematic and subtle, yet the increased alignment of social justice and environmental justice perspectives is essential.

Conclusions: Ontologies of Socioenvironmental Justice

This research argues that an ontological re-envisioning of nature is a vital intellectual and practical step for the always interconnected social justice and environmental justice movements. Both nature and society need to be recognized and appreciated for their material and discursive components. Social and environmental justice movements are often seen as distinct political movements and realms of academic inquiry. Social natures (Castree & Braun, 2001), recognizing and embracing the material and discursive components of both human and nonhuman worlds, can help develop highly critical and productive analyses of the socioenvironmental worlds in which we live. "Social injustice is about a group of people in a specific time and place who have been wronged" (Stewart, 2013, p. 190), yet there is a need to contextualize specific injustices within larger systems that perpetuate or even cause the injustices. Beyond the ontological understanding of nature and society as interpenetrating agents of production, political ecology stresses the importance of also engaging with the interpenetration of nature and capitalism, ranging across local and global scales. Extractive industries—mineral, oil, gas/hydrocarbon, etc.—are frequently associated with ecological and social damage, and have long been critically understood in relation to capitalist production and colonial pursuits, necessitating system-level changes in both political economy and social relations (Rajan & Duncan, 2013).

While a systemic-level analysis provides socioenvironmental context, the lived experiences of individuals making their homes in "nature" provide texture, richness, and tangibility. Undoubtedly, the Hillside residents are discursively produced, both by society at large and by their own self-constructions, but these individuals also exist in the most material of ways. Ontologically, then, a perspective that is activated at the interpenetrations of the material and discursive provides a sense of the Hillside residents' agency in their own self-constructions and oppression at the hands of systemic inequalities and injustices. These individuals living on the Hillside provide a very tangible representation of the liminal spaces between nature and society and between material and discursive (Hekman, 2010). They more clearly live through and construct the experiences of being part of *both* nature and society, illustrating that these seemingly stable constructs are in fact much murkier than often expected.

Even though the Hillside residents often seem(ed) to feel that they are without political agency in many regards, they can also be understood as active agents of productive change, as representatives of possibility. Gilchrist and Ravenscroft (2013) question whether subversive groups such as the Hillside residents who unsettle seemingly already settled sociopolitical relationships should be evaluated for ideological critique or revolutionary potential:

> [C]onsider the potential agency of performances in ordering the social world and the political work done in aesthetic encounters that (re)perform social relations, in making social struggles visible. This is not about aesthetic autonomy but how affects play a materialist role in the composition of social identities and social struggles. (p. 63)

The Hillside residents do not consider themselves as part of a larger political movement, and rarely do/did the individuals living on the Hillside engage in stereotypically political ways for their own advocacy or for the advocacy of others. However, the political potential of the Hillside residents should not be dismissed or underappreciated. The Hillside residents, by their existences and their livelihoods, make visible the often invisible social struggles of homelessness and severe poverty, and therefore contribute to the material components of both their identities and the sociopolitical successes and failures of many individuals and groups living at the spatial and socioeconomic margins of society. Homelessness, in particular, is "prototypically the bellwether of urban justice. If anyone needs the right to the city, surely it is the homeless" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 9). The Hillside residents also complicate traditional notions of nonhuman nature in a visible way, necessitating that holders of these traditional notions encounter and engage with these problematic dichotomies. Critical questions emerge from any analysis of the Hillside residents' behavior and existence. How can our neoliberal political economy be just if it helps produce such vast differences in distribution of wealth? How can nonhuman nature exist when these individuals live their daily lives in such landscapes? How can a single activity—camping—be both a necessity of life and a recreational pursuit?

Toward a More Socioenvironmentally Just Research Agenda

Implications of this research for leisure services management are substantial. Park managers and city officials, like those officials tasked with managing all socioenvironmental systems, are advised to take a deliberative, participatory, and relational management approach (Karvonen, 2011). Participatory planning approaches and a relational perspective enables an incorporation of both discursive and material "natures" into urban, suburban, rural, and unbuilt landscapes, just as the incorporation of the built, urban world should be brought into nature, enhancing the lived human experience as well as the systems' ecological integrity (Karvonen, 2011). In recent decades, a significant body of research has emerged that seeks to dismantle the dualisms of nature/culture and social/ecological in environmental research (e.g., Bakker & Bridge, 2006; Braun & Castree, 1998; Castree, 2001; Whatmore, 2002). As a result, attitudes often reflect an evolving awareness of the profound interconnections between the human and nonhuman components of landscapes, ecosystems, and sociopolitical systems. This type of research, however, is primarily theoretical, and much of the empirical research leaves nature/culture dualisms (often implicitly) intact. The Hillside residents' lived experiences are ripe settings for critically understanding justice, particularly in critiquing the spatial contradictions that characterize experiences of homelessness. As Mitchell (2003) reminds us, there is no justice if there is not a space in which that justice can occur.

Leisure studies, like other disciplines, should prioritize socioenvironmental justice in research and activism, while simultaneously remaining vigilantly critical of upper class, white, heteronormative perceptions of what, exactly, leisure is and can be. Accordingly, "leisure is a context where people can create changes that may bring about a more socially just world" (Parry, Johnson, & Stewart, 2013, p. 83). But a just world requires acknowledgement of the very real discursive and material components necessary to undertake this work. Part of that materialist recognition acknowledges the (bio)physical settings in which leisure is a context for justice movements. Justice movements of multiple stripes need to appreciate and attend to the complexities of the interconnected singularities that unite their causes. Ultimately, social and environmental problems "are just as much about the different ideas of what justice means as

they are about technical issues" (Harrison, 2011, p. xiii). Justice, in all of its forms, needs further interrogation from scholars, as contemporary theories of justice tend to "restrict the meaning of justice to the morally proper distribution of benefits and burdens among society's members" (Young, 1990, p. 15). A working definition of social justice is work toward a world of equity, dignity, and basic rights through democratically organized social spaces. Environmental justice is work toward a world of equity, dignity, and rights with respect to ecological conditions and decision making processes. Socioenvironmental justice, then, is work toward a world that accounts for equity, dignity, and rights of all members of the interlocking human and environmental material and discursive conditions. Such notions of justice critically incorporate communities in decision-making processes, addressing past wrongs where communities often have been represented by the most powerful members, leaving the ideas and concerns of the marginalized out of the scope of the political discussion (Harrison, 2011). The goals of socioenvironmental justice research and scholarship can and should be far more ambitious than unpacking the scope and ethical dilemmas associated with various injustices. Socioenvironmental justice should move beyond the monitoring and reporting of inequities to seek and advocate for alternatives that critically and proactively obviate the problems. My advocacy for and engagement with the Hillside residents was an initial and incomplete effort in this direction.

In addition to a critical focus on the role of research in promoting socioenvironmental justice, the concept of ontology itself requires continued attention. Ontology does not portend a "fixed, given reality. It is not the baseline of reality from which we operate. Rather, it is a historical construct, a fluctuating and heterogeneous multiplicity. But this does not detract from its reality or, indeed, from its materiality" (Hekman, 2010, p. 58). Our present ontologies need critical consideration and evolution, recognizing the ways that "the material and the social intertwine and interact in all manner of promiscuous combinations" (Thrift, 1996, p. 24). Leisure scholars, too often operating at the poles of the discursive-material binary, might consider the advice of St. Pierre (2013), who encourages researchers to attend to "the physicality of theorizing" (p. 470), where theory is nothing if not material, and the material, essential world cannot be independent of socially constructed theories.

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