

Placing Regional Environmental Justice in California’s San Joaquin Valley

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*O body swayed to music
O brightening glance
How can we know the dancer
From the dance?*

William Butler Yeats “Among School Children”

The concept of regions has occupied a central but unsettled place in the development of both political ecology and environmental justice scholarship. This unsettled quality, I suggest, derives from the complex, contradictory, and contested definitions of regions as units defined by social, cultural, economic, biophysical, political, and other dimensions. In this essay, I examine the ways in which environmental justice social movements (EJMs) in California San Joaquin Valley are organizing themselves to engage in what is formally termed as regional planning related to climate change mitigation and adaptation. I will use this case study to demonstrate the potency and problems for EJMs as they organize their thought and action through a regional approach. This case will also serve as an opportunity to reflect upon the place of regions in environmental justice and political ecology scholarship.

In his review of the centrality of regional concept in the rise and development of political ecology (PE), Neumann (2010:368) observes that the term is engrained in the foundational texts of Blaikie and Brookfield (1987). For Blaikie and Brookfield, “the ‘adjective ‘regional’ is important because it is necessary to take account of environmental variability and the spatial variations in resilience and sensitivity of the land.’” Two of the foundational texts in EJ scholarship can also be seen as adopting a regional approach. Pulido (1996) situates her historical narratives of conflicts over Hispano grazing rights in New Mexico and pesticides and labor unrest in California’s San Joaquin Valley in the broadly defined, “Southwest.” In a similar way, Bullard (1990) calls out the legacies of

violence, segregation, and structural racism in the American South as leading to the phenomenon of *Dumping in Dixie*.

While early PE scholarship offered compelling explanations of environmental, political, and economic inequities, they also tended to reify regions as “things”, transformed by the power of ‘external’ forces” instead of “relational, historicized, contextualized, and dynamic” entities (Neumann 2009: 369-370). To address these shortcomings in PE, Neumann (2009:372) advocates for “a more universal and theoretically robust [Regional Political Ecology], which builds on the central insight in human geography that regions are historically contingent processes, wherein the reproduction and transformation of society is inseparable from the transformation of nature within prevailing relations of power.” In Pulido (1996) and Bullard (1990) the portrayal of regions (“Southwest” and “Dixie”) suffer some of the same shortcomings of early PE. That is, they bound and name an area as the settings in which environmental injustices are produced and contested, but do not examine how the ways in which these bounding process are themselves expressions of power.

In the decades since Pulido’s and Bullard’s work, environmental justice social movements (EJMs), and by extension the scholarship on these movements, have been castigated by critics (often writing in the PE tradition) for its presumed “militant particularism” (Harvey and Williams 1995) and an associated deficit of insufficient theorization on how local injustices and struggles to address them are shaped by broader political economic dynamics (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003) Indeed, it can be argued that early environmental justice (EJ) scholarship did include a strong focus on local manifestations of EJMs that were built “from the ground up” (Cole and Foster 2001) However, a careful reading of EJ scholarship reveals considerable attention to the ways in which environmental injustices are produced and contested at multiple geographic and jurisdictional scales cross-cutting what can be termed regional, national, international and global (Sze et al. 2009; Harrison 2011; Bulkeley et al. 2013; Bulkeley 2005; Bickerstaff and Agyeman 2009; Ikeme 2003; Pellow 2007).

The similar trajectory of refinements in both PE and EJ scholarship can be traced to their drawing on similar sources of underlying theory from critical human geography, in particular, debates on regions within a politics of scale (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005; Neumann 2009; Sayre 2005; Massey 1993) Herod and Wright (2002:5) delineate these debates as concerning; 1.) the ontological status of regions; 2.) the representational practices of regions; and 3.) the traffic between scales.

On the first point, regions can be understood as material things defined by their biophysical nature and boundaries and/or as discursively constructed and contested. In this paper I adopt a critical realist perspective on regions. That is, I acknowledge that their shape and content is defined by through processes in which bio-physical factors (topography and meteorology, my case of the San Joaquin Valley) intersect with social practices, forming a hybrid socio-nature (Swyngedouw 2007, 2009). These social practices in turn are both discursive (naming and bounding) and material (shaped by regulation by state and market institutions).

Second, regions can represented in diverse ways such as a middle rung in a ladder from local up to global, a meso layer in a concentric of circles, a nested Matrushka doll, a node in a network or web or other imaginaries, each with their own material implications. I will not pre-select any of these imaginaries as the “true” representations of the San Joaquin Valley but will rather follow Cohen and McCarthy’s (2014) to observe how contending actors define and “scale” the region and the consequences of these definitions for environmental governance.

Third, “rescaling” refers to the processes through which social actors effect changes in the spatial dimension of governance (from local to global and back again). Imaginaries such as “scale jumping” (Bulkeley 2005; Kurtz 2002, 2003) are often used to describe rescaling strategies used by EJMs and other social movements as they seek to address the scalar mismatch between “the scale at which a social problem is experienced and the scale(s) at which it could be politically addressed or resolved” (Kurtz 2003:894). While

intuitive, such representations risk reifying scale as set of stepping stones that be jumped between, and miss how scale is constituted through social practices and how rescaling often “plays a role in the creation of new objects and spaces of environmental governance” (Cohen and McCarthy 2014:2).

In place of scale jumping then, I propose the term “scale dancing” to describe the fluid ways in which social actors perform scale and are reciprocally defined through these choreographed practices. Thus the poet Yeats’ metaphysical question, “How can we know the dancer/ From the dance?” This question illuminates, if not fully clarifies, the multi-dimensional qualities of regions as things (defined as a set of steps in a given bounds of the stage); regions as process (the flow between steps) and regions as repertoires of individual or groups of actors (the dancers). Yeats’ hailing and identification with observer (“we”) reminds us that the region is also a product of mind (discourse, aesthetics, meaning). Unnamed by Yeats, but crucial for our purposes, is the choreographer (market and state systems that produce the structures within which the dancer performs the dance). All of these aspects of the region can be said to exist, yet cannot attain their full expression except through their intersection in practice. In what follows, I will invoke Yeats as muse in interpreting the rescaling dance of EJMs and public agencies as they perform regional climate change planning.¹

Placing the San Joaquin Valley

Conflicts over the rescaling of environmental politics in California’s San Joaquin Valley provide a useful case study of the place of regions in environmental justice movements and environmental justice scholarship. The San Joaquin Valley is often referred to as one of California’s primary regions, a designation based on the ways in which topography, meteorology, industrial geography, and historical and cultural identities are represented as cohering in place. At once the agricultural heartland of the Golden State and a major source of the state’s oil production, the San Joaquin Valley is also situated as “the Other California” (Haslam 1994) where extreme environmental and social injustices are often hidden in plain sight (Mitchell 1996; Harrison 2011). Some of this invisibility is a factor

of the “regional scale” itself missing key drivers of disparities that lie outside this spatial boundary, including national immigration policy, global agro-industrial and petro-chemical trading regimes, and international transportation networks.

EJMs have struggled for decades to address the racialized concentration of environmental hazards and limited access to environmental amenities in San Joaquin Valley communities largely inhabited by low-income people and people of color (Cole and Foster 2001; Perkins 2012; London, et al. 2011; Huang and London 2012). More recently EJMs are complementing their traditional focus on reducing the disproportionate burdens of environmental hazards with campaigns to increase the presence and access to environmental resources and opportunities (such as nutritious food, green spaces, living wage jobs, affordable housing, public transit. Some activists have deemed this a shift from a “no” movement to a “grow” movement (Jermé and Wakefield 2013).² Coinciding with this shift in topical focus, EJMs are rescaling their strategies to pursue this “grow” agenda through engagement in regional land use, transportation, and housing planning. At the same time, cities and counties in the San Joaquin Valley are rescaling their otherwise local land use, transportation, and housing planning according to regional policy frameworks.

In this paper, explore the opportunities and threats that these rescaling processes provoke for EJMs and their struggles for environmental justice in the San Joaquin Valley. In particular, I will make the following three arguments.

1. Organizing regionally provides EJMs with opportunities to confront regional economic drivers and regional jurisdictions that shape patterns of environmental injustices;
2. Regional strategies also provoke significant dilemmas such as challenge of sustaining engagement across extensive spatial territories of action, encompassing broader issue agendas, with broader alliances, requiring new sets of technical expertise, and with engagement with a broader set of policy and economic protagonists.

3. EJMs and planning agencies are engaged in scale dancing as they shape and are shaped by their repertoires of conflict and collaboration provoked by recent state mandates on regional-scale planning.

Scale Dancing and Regional Planning

The rescaling of land use, transportation, and housing planning in the San Joaquin Valley has been influenced to a significant degree by the passage of California's Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (Senate Bill 375). It can be said that SB 375 is provoking a significant and complex rescaling of a global goal (mitigating climate change) as a state mandate to be planned and implemented at a regional scale. However, this should not be understood as simply a "down-scaling" from global to regional, but rather a fluid reconfiguration of the relationships between multiple scales of governance that flow in multiple and sometimes unpredictable ways.

SB 375 is the primary mechanism to meet California's greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction goals (reducing emissions to 1990 levels by 2020).³ Under SB 375, each federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO)⁴ in California is allocated a target for reducing automobile and light truck traffic (the single largest source of greenhouse gases). MPOs are mandated to develop a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) as part of their larger Regional Transportation Plan. These SCSs must include comprehensive land use, transportation, and housing plans and policies designed to build regions less reliant on private automobile use and therefore with a smaller climate change foot print.

Until the advent of SB 375, MPOs in the San Joaquin Valley tended to reflect a "local control" political culture and had limited themselves to funding local transportation projects proposed by the cities and counties in their jurisdiction (Andrews and Fairfax 1983; Lubell, Feiock, and Handy 2009). Under SB 375, MPOs in the San Joaquin Valley have to consider not only the allocation of transportation funding across its member

jurisdictions, but also how comprehensive planning could reduce the climate change footprint for their metropolitan territory as a whole.

Reflecting on the challenges of regional coordination, a board member of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control Board and the California Air Resources Board described the passage of SB 375 as creating new forums for collaboration across organizational and issue-based siloes.

“I don't see that there's a place for folks to get together to collaborate... how do you make a big tent? Not if we're thinking just water and air, but when you get things like SB375 and sustainable communities, well, then, people start, but then again there's an entity that's now responsible, so it's got to bring all these folks together.” (Personal communication with author, June 18, 2014.)

Despite the limits on shaping San Joaquin Valley-wide policy, SB 375 does offer an opportunity for EJMs to advocate for public transit, affordable housing, access to living wage jobs, parks, and other quality of life issues associated with a “grow” frame on environmental justice at a regional scale. Many EJM leaders active in decades-long struggles to compel the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to pass strict regional air pollution control plans expressed frustration that even their rare policy successes could not address the land use, transportation, housing and employment patterns, that contributed to much of the region’s air pollution. Under the SB 375 rubric, EJMs could begin to address this scalar mismatch (Towers 2000; Kurtz 2003) . One EJ activist described the developing in their analysis and tactics this way.

“I think that we always knew land use was a problem, but for a while it just seemed so overwhelming, and out of reach to make any difference in decisions about land use planning that we didn't engage in it...I think a lot of things happened to shift everybody to working on that, of course SB375 passing,... I think SB 375 created an opportunity to touch a lot of the opportunities we cared about, like air quality” (Personal communication with author, June 18, 2013).

The capacity to address land use at a regional scale both offered EJMs new opportunities to achieve environmental justice and provoked a new set of dilemmas. First, although SB 375 was billed as a regional planning framework, implementation has been complicated in the San Joaquin Valley. Unlike their counterpart MPOs in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento area, Los Angeles area and San Diego area, all of which encompass multiple counties, the 8 counties in the San Joaquin Valley have opted to create their own MPOs. This fragmentation makes implementation of SB 375 on a region-wide basis challenging and has promoted regular – but to date, unsuccessful – calls by the California legislators, air resource agencies, and advocates to merge the 8 San Joaquin Valley MPOs into one regional MPO.⁵ That is, SB 375 largely involved regional planning at the county scale *in* the San Joaquin Valley but not *for* the San Joaquin Valley as a whole. This scalar mismatch required EJMs to dance between these two scales of regional policy and county-based planning.

Second, EJMs were confronted with a scalar mismatch between the county scale of SCSs and the primarily local scale of land use decision-making. That is, while MPOs develop SCSs that encompass multiple local jurisdictions in their counties, they have little leverage to compel cities and counties to implement these plans. Referring more broadly to the local control capture of regional growth management in California, Pincetl (1994) recounts a “history of failure.” Therefore, EJMs were compelled to dance between county-scale planning by MPOs and implementation at local governance scales. Third, to engage at the regional scale of the SB 375 governance, EJMs needed to build broader alliances than were common in traditional EJ activism. In this task, EJMs in the San Joaquin Valley had the advantage of building on existing alliances between local, regional, statewide and national organizations representing EJ organizations, mainstream environmentalists, public health advocates, and others in networks such as the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition (CVAQ). However, to address the broader set of issues associated with SB 375, EJMs also had to reach out to organizations dedicated to agricultural land and habitat protection, smart growth, community economic development, and other interests. While this broad coalition building provided access to a larger scope of financial, technical, and organizational resources, it also provoked

tensions as better-funded mainstream environmental organizations sometimes dominated the agenda setting and messaging of the coalitions.

Despite their internal tensions, a coalition of over 30 organizations calling themselves the Community Equity Coalition developed a range of tactics to infuse their agenda into the formal SCS planning process. In 2013, the Coalition developed a policy agenda called “Seizing the Opportunity: Using the San Joaquin Valley Sustainable Communities Strategies to advance health, sustainability, and shared prosperity.”⁶ The tag line for the agenda spoke to the cross-section of the coalition’s issue areas. “Regional Transportation Plans and Sustainable Communities Strategies can jumpstart the region’s economy, save families money, improve public health, reduce air and water pollution, and strengthen the agricultural sector.”

With this platform as their playbook, a number of advocates played what can be considered an “inside game” of directly engaging in the public participation structures run by the MPOs. This included serving on committees to identify the indicators and performance metrics that would be used to construct and assess the SCS planning scenarios and providing written and oral comments on the drafts of the planning documents. Others played an “outside game” of organizing community members to pack public meetings, working with legal advocates to prepare a litigation strategy if needed. This outside game also involved appealing to state agencies such as the California Air Resources Board to use their authority to approve SCSs as leverage to compel regional MPOs to incorporate elements from the Community Equity Coalition agenda.

Expanding the topical scope of advocacy also demanded new sets of technical expertise. EJMs in the San Joaquin Valley had developed expertise in air quality and water quality science and policy as well as litigation approaches, engaging on SB 375 required expertise in complex approaches to land use and transportation planning and modeling. Towards this end, the Community Equity Coalition collaborated with a range of academic and consulting firm partners to conduct studies and develop analytical tools to inform and legitimize their policy agenda. These tools included several studies of housing

demand that recommended smaller infill developments over sprawling suburban land uses, analyses that modeled the economic, health, environmental, and other impacts of the regional planning scenarios proposed by the San Joaquin Valley MPOs, a range of social equity-focused analyses. These latter tools developed by the UC Davis Center for Regional Change included environmental justice and regional equity analyses that highlighted the places where the highest concentrations of environmental hazards overlapped with the populations with the low levels of economic, political, and social resources; a Jobs-Housing Fit analysis that identified imbalances in the proximity of affordable housing and the jobs accessible to low-income families; and a Health Impact Assessment methodology to measure the projected health implications of different SCS planning scenarios (Karner, London et al. 2014).

The Community Equity Coalition used these tools to advocate for SCS scenarios that prioritized urban infill over suburban sprawl, public transit over new highways, affordable housing near jobs and essential services, and revitalization of small rural communities. These visual representations at the regional scale can be understood as what Kurtz (2002, 2003) would call an “environmental justice scale counter-frames” to the MPO regional planning scale frames, in that they inserted advocates’ own sets of meanings and social equity values into the representational technologies used by the MPOs.

Despite their significant and sustained organizing and advocacy, the Community Equity Coalition was unable to prevail in passing the progressive planning scenarios they sought in their target counties in the San Joaquin Valley. Ultimately, the MPO planners reflected the conservative political culture of their policy boards and selected scenarios closer to the status quo. One planner described the policy environment she faced,

“This is a poor county, the majority of our members come from very poor communities, with huge unemployment rates. They want to know if there will be jobs. They want to know if they’re going to get water, which is tied to jobs. So if I went in there and gave them a pitch on social equity, even though the majority of people might be people of color, they’d say what about the jobs?”

(Personal communication with author, June 18, 2013).

This invoking of the “poor communities” of the San Joaquin Valley as the reason for opposition of MPOs to social equity-oriented SCSs belies the fact that much of the opposition came not from poor people, but from the land development industry that bankrolls many of the MPO board members’ campaigns in their home jurisdictions.

Despite these setbacks, the Community Equity Coalition did achieve several notable successes. In Fresno County, the MPO board approved two of the Coalition’s campaign agenda items; a needs assessment process to identify transportation needs and greatest infrastructure needs in disadvantaged communities; and a new “Sustainable Planning and Infrastructure” grant program to fund much-needed infrastructure improvements in existing communities. In Kern County, the MPO used the CRC’s environmental justice analysis as part of the SCS and in San Joaquin County, advocates developed an on-going collaboration process with MPO that will extend into the SCS implementation process.⁷

All of these victories required the Community Equity Coalition to perform intricate scale dances between state, regional, county, and local governance levels in ways that reshaped the tactics, messaging, and the composition of the coalitions themselves. Indeed, the potency of the coalition was largely based on its capacity for fluidity across these scales with an emphasis, but not a static focus, on the region.

Conclusions

To framing question for this essay – what is the place of regions in EJMs and in EJ scholarship? – I submit that understanding regions provides a crucial perspective on the ways that EJM perform scale (as dancer and dance). Furthermore, a focus on regions as always already political sites of convergence and contestation between EJMs and governance institutions can illuminate the stakes involved in these rescaling processes. In particular, placing the development of EJMs in what Neumann (2009: 369) would call a “relational, historicized, contextualized, and dynamic” San Joaquin Valley will allow EJ

scholarship to avoid a militant particularism and instead to grapple with the fundamental structures and processes that produce environmental injustice and the strategies needed to reimagine and reconstitute the region.

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Endnotes

¹ I acknowledge the inspiration to use Yeats’ poem from philosopher Jerry Gill (1975).

² This can be seen in recent change in the name of the 2014 conference of the Central California Environmental Justice Network from “Roots of Resistance” to the “Roots of Resilience” (<http://ccejn.wordpress.com/2014/08/27/last-week-to-register-roots-of-resilience-2014/>).

³ These targets were set by Assembly Bill 32, the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006.

⁴ Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are created by federal law to conduct transportation planning in urban areas with populations greater than 50,000. For more information on MPOs see: <http://www.planning.dot.gov/mpo.asp>.

⁵ This effort to form a SJV-wide Metropolitan Planning Organization echoes the efforts throughout the 1980s to create an 8-county San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (SJVAPCD) by merging the 8 individual county-scale districts. After a state senator threatened to create the regional air district by legislative fiat, the county governments relented and formed the SJVAPCD in 1991. (London, in preparation).

⁶ *Seizing the Opportunity* can be found at: http://www.climateplan.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/SJV-Platform_2pager_Final_23s_02212013.pdf

⁷ For a brief summary of these victories by one of the regional coordinating organizations of the Community Equity Coalition see: <http://www.climateplan.org/fresno-san-joaquin-counties-adopt-momentous-scses/>