

Editorial Essay

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The quest for environmental justice is a social, political, and moral struggle for human rights, healthy environments, and thriving democracies led by residents of communities most negatively impacted by economic and ecological degradation . . . Activists and scholars of environmental justice challenge the disproportionate burden of toxic contamination, waste dumping, and ecological devastation borne by low-income communities, communities of color, and colonized territories. They advocate for social policies that uphold the right to meaningful, democratic participation of frontline communities in environmental decision making, and they have redefined the core meanings of the “environment” and the interrelationships between humans and nature, thereby challenging and transforming environmentalism more broadly. (Di Chiro 100)

Theories of environmental justice invoke how efforts to act against the destruction of the natural world have never been disconnected from struggles for social justice. Based in a Canadian university faculty where significant work is being done to challenge both social injustice and environmental crises, the *UnderCurrents* Editorial Collective felt it important to focus a volume on reconnecting and regrouping environmental and social movements, and upholding Black women, Indigenous women, and Women of Colour’s foundational role in environmental justice. As we note in our Call for Submissions for this volume:

Over thirty years has passed since community activists gathered together and fought back against toxic dumping in their town of Afton in Warren County, North Carolina. The decades-long resistance that took place in Warren County marked the founding of the environmental justice movement in the United States, a movement that, to this day, is predominantly led by women of colour. The framework of environmental justice has since been adopted and adapted in activist and academic circles around the world. However, though environmental justice is a relatively new term, the idea is centuries old. As Agyeman et al. point out, Indigenous peoples on the land now called Canada have long been “articulating environmental injustices in relation to loss of land, Aboriginal title,

and devastation of their traditional territories and the life forms they support” (7). (Ghorbani Nejad 73)

Drawing attention to the interconnected ‘human’ and ‘nature’ sides of environmental justice feels undeniably necessary. The Standing Rock Sioux’s fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline is as much a fight against settler colonialism as it is a fight against resource extraction and environmental pollution. Lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan’s water supply is yet another chapter in the legacy of systemic environmental racism. Closer to home, pipeline development in Canada reveals intersections of racism, settler colonialism, environmental destruction, and class where, for instance, Enbridge’s Line 9 pipeline pumps tar sands bitumen through Aamjiwnaang First Nation—an Ojibwe community already facing the health impacts of living within Canada’s “Chemical Valley”—as well as the highly racialized Jane and Finch community. A rise in right-wing populism, across the globe and in Canadian politics, is uniting and strengthening those who disregard global climate change to support unfettered capitalist development, with the xenophobic, white supremacist, misogynist, homophobic, transphobic “Alt-Right.” And as Canada is set to celebrate 150 years since the confederation of the Canadian settler state—a celebration purportedly focused on themes of “diversity, reconciliation with indigenous peoples, the environment and youth” (Hannay)—Justin

Trudeau’s federal government has yet to take meaningful action on its promises to tackle climate change and reinvigorate nation-to-nation relationships between the Canadian government and Indigenous nations.

Across geographies and scales, the importance of struggling for environmental justice is becoming ever-more pressing, at the same time that the resources that allow us to do this work are under attack. During the production of this volume, teaching assistants, contract faculty, and graduate assistants—including the graduate assistants who worked for *UnderCurrents*, and many students who volunteer their time and work to *UnderCurrents*—went on strike for tuition indexation at York University: so increasing tuition fees would be matched by increasing financial compensation for graduate students, ensuring that support for graduate students would not be cut, underhandedly, by increasing tuition fees. Although the strike won protection for tuition indexation, a new university funding model subsequently cut virtually all of the graduate assistant positions, removing more than 600 students from the Canadian Union of Public Employees’ local 3903—a move seen by many as union-busting. Many of these graduate assistant positions existed in York University’s Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES), where *UnderCurrents* is housed. When previously every FES Master’s student, with very few exceptions, was guaranteed a graduate assistantship, these positions upheld FES’ vision and mandate for, ostensibly, interdisciplinary *environmental justice*—these positions supported initiatives for accessibility, community, and equity within the university; strengthened long-term relationships and partnerships with community organizations; and assisted the operation of arts-spaces such as the Crossroads Gallery, Wild Garden Media Centre, and *UnderCurrents*. Cutting these positions—part of the increasing neo-liberalization of the university—might be seen as an attack on environmental justice organizing as well. In the latter stages of the production of this volume, *UnderCurrents* lost its graduate assistants, forcing us to operate as

a wholly volunteer collective, delaying the publication of this volume and raising questions about the viability of *UnderCurrents* going forward.

However, while our current circumstances may appear dire, the works in this volume illuminate how those who have been struggling for environmental justice remain strong and resilient—how, particularly, those Women of Colour, Black women, and Indigenous women, who gave rise to environmental justice in its academic conceptualization, and its earlier actualization, are not in retreat. As Melissa A. Dean says in the poem that opens this volume: “Black Power is on the RIiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiISE again.” Struggles for (environmental) justice have a long history and have momentum: we are not starting from nowhere in this work, we are not alone. And if we work together, and in solidarity across identities, positions, and geographies, we have much to gain. Maya Nye and Reena Shadaan’s scholarly essay “Solidarity in Struggle” (accompanied by the artwork of Kokila Bhattacharya) highlights these themes, looking at the history of solidarity between Bhopal, India, and Kanawha Valley, USA: two communities who have, devastatingly, seen the consequences of unsafe conditions and operations in (Union Carbide’s) chemical facilities, and who recognize that their struggles for environmental justice are not isolated, but globally interconnected.

Pieces in this volume look at violent intersections across structures of oppression: how sexual violence, racialized violence, colonial violence, etc. are intertwined with environmental violence. These topics are troubling and upsetting, and some readers might find them triggering.

Tina Garnett’s poem “from the dust of their elder’s bones” addresses how the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism and black slavery affect the lives

of Indigenous and Black women, and particularly how mainstream services meant to ‘heal’ against trauma can re-victimize Indigenous and Black women when their methods for ‘healing’ are born out colonial and racist theorizations. Rachel Small’s poem “Lot Eight / Lote Ocho” (of which, a spoken-word recording is featured on the *UnderCurrents* website) was developed out of Small’s conversations with Guatemalan women fighting and surviving against intersectional violences, including sexual violences, created by Canadian mining companies. The poem asks how Canadians might act in solidarity—or more—with these women, both in holding these companies accountable for their actions, but also calling Canadians to question how we benefit from neo-colonial mining operations and the realities of settler colonial dispossession in Canada. An excerpt from Peter Hobbs’ comic book “The Tale of the Sarnia Nose” highlights the racist and colonial hypocrisy of criminalizing Indigenous “smoke shacks” around Aamjiwnaang and Sarnia, Ontario, while the serious impact that industrial pollution in the area is having on human and environmental health remains largely unrecognized and unchallenged.

Carmen Umana K.’s “Cyborg Salmon” and Erica Gajewski’s “Mercury, Water, PCB, DDT” call viewers to think about the boundaries of “humans” and “nature” in environmental justice, or the lack of any such boundaries—how human impact on the environment is increasingly ingrained in the very *being* of other beings. Umana K.’s life-size sculpture of an adult salmon, built out of metal and other materials, showcases how technological and social management of Atlantic Salmon in Lake Ontario make these fish “cyborgs,” in Donna Haraway’s conceptualization. And Gajewski’s life-size drawing of a beluga whale, with chemical formulas and symbols covering the animal’s

body, calls viewers to contend with the extent of human impact on the environment when “[b]eluga whales . . . are so contaminated with toxins that their bodies, when they wash ashore, are treated as toxic waste.”

In his scholarly essay, Dylan McMahon explores the Peterborough, Ontario iteration of Food Not Bombs as a not-easily-defined organization and sustained direct action, which responds to food insecurity, develops radical participatory democracy, and re-thinks the interweavings of capitalism, food, and human bodies. For McMahon, Food Not Bombs is a profound example of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque: a temporary imagined *and lived* subversion of dominant societal relations.

Jan Kucic-Riker addresses political and material facets of environmental injustice in relation to British Columbia Hydro’s proposed Site C Clean Energy Project. Kucic-Riker demonstrates how ‘environmental’ initiatives are not immune from perpetuating settler colonialism and environmental racism. Although, as the name suggests, the Site C project is intended to produce “clean energy,” concerns of local Indigenous communities—particularly the Treaty 8 First Nations—are not being sufficiently addressed in the project’s planning, and the Treaty 8 First Nations are expected to face significant harms when and if the project is completed and becomes operational.

The volume closes with excerpts from Kathleen Brown’s story, “City Disappearing,” which turns towards personal and embodied questions of living amidst immense environmental devastation. As lovers Vera and Hartland awake to a flooding city, the piece leaves us to ponder where do they—and all of us facing lives increasingly underwritten by environmental injustice—go from here?

Works Cited

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