

REVIEWS

Review of Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger by Julie Sze. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020, 144 pp. ISBN: 978-0-520-30074-3).

The accelerating manner in which the planet's natural resources are being plundered, depleted and compromised is nothing new. Throughout the years, the climate justice movement has repeatedly demonstrated the entwinement of environmental destruction and climate change with economic and sociopolitical structures of oppression. From Robert D. Bullard's groundbreaking *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (1990) to more contemporary writings such as Dorceta Taylor's *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (2014) and Harriet A. Washington's *A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and Its Assault on the American Mind* (2019), environmental justice scholars have explored this interconnection by focusing on the ramifications of environmental racism and systemic prejudice. Extractive capitalism, privatization, neocolonial politics and neoliberalism seem to be the four horsemen of environmental apocalypse, turning humans into disposable beings and treating nature as an expendable, never-ending source of income: "If we are to save life on Earth, neoliberalised global accumulation and the current policies of globally competitive capitalist development have to be abandoned" (Satgar 2018, 6). Furthermore, opting for a holistic approach to climate violence and environmental racism can lead to question human and more-than-human hierarchies. Problematizing this relationship, as well as centering the discussion

on natural resources, is the result of incorporating the Indigenous notion that justice is a concept that all beings deserve, whether animate or not (McGregor 2018, 12). These and other issues are explored in Julie Sze's *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (2020), where she invites her readers to reflect upon the impact of government policies in relation to land, water, pollution and the position in which sidelined and minoritized communities are being put in because of the greed of corporations and corrupt nations.

In the introduction, Sze manages to dissect the history of climate and environmental justice in the United States by focusing not only on the natural and economic aspects of the matter, but also on the human side of the fight for a better, equal and fair world. In relation to this, she asserts that a fundamental part of the climate justice movement relies on the conceptualization of climate and social struggles by centering the experiences and histories of environmental justice activists/advocates/scholars (Sze 2020, 8). Moreover, the author criticizes hegemonic power, corporal capitalism, neoliberal politics and environmental racism by discussing how low-income, marginalized and silenced communities are the ones who suffer the most at the hands of government-approved industrial pollution. As the introduction moves on, the importance of different environmental art forms in the climate justice movement is highlighted, as "cultural production, creativity and beauty," Sze states, "are necessary to get through the moments of danger we inhabit, the wars without end, the nihilism and violence, and the end of the planet as we know it" (19). The writer explores these "moments of danger" by doing an in-depth analysis of the intersectional



nature of oppression and climate violence in the three chapters that comprise the book. While the first one deals with the Standing Rock Sioux fight to shut down the Dakota Access Pipeline, the second tackles the contamination of water and other natural resources in Flint and Central Valley; finally, the third has to do with the reconstruction politics after Hurricanes Katrina and Maria, as well as the ongoing efforts to relocate Kivalina, a village in the Arctic. Throughout her analysis, Sze uses these case studies to examine the many faces of environmental, climate and social justice.

The first chapter examines the Standing Rock Sioux/Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) conflict from an anticolonial, anticapitalist, and environmental point of view, delving into the importance of Indigenous sovereignty and land rights. Concepts such as dispossession, violence and production/extraction are central to the chapter (34) as they are used to explain the impact of settler colonial practices in the United States regarding climate justice and Indigenous struggles. In particular, the notion of dispossession—especially Indigenous dispossession—is drawn from the #Standing-RockSyllabus, a project carefully compiled by the many contributors of the NYU Stands with Standing Rock Collective. Sze lays out the Standing Rock Sioux opposition to the creation of the Dakota Access Pipeline, contextualizing it by explaining how racism and both climate and social justice are inherently intertwined; moreover, she brings into light how the authoritative presence of the police combined with the lack of action from the administration has further damaged the already fragile relationship between the United States government and Indigenous communities. The chapter also explores the #NoDAPL movement—and how it was supported both online and in multicultural, multinational protests—emphasizing the role of Indigenous resistance, as it is “fundamental to environmental justice, particularly in Indigenous conceptions of nature and of human and more-than-human life based on interconnection” (27-28). Indigenous activism rests on the belief that all human and non-human entities are interwoven, a perspective that shapes and informs their approach to

environmental justice and climate action. In addition, the author underlines the role and efforts of women and youth in the #NoDAPL campaign. In the analysis that follows, Sze discusses the significance of environmental justice and art, highlighting how fundamental it was during the height of the conflict between protestors and the police, as art is an “indispensable feature of creative sustenance and renewal” (47), and, more often than not, encourages solidarity amongst different marginalized communities.

The second chapter focuses on the contamination of two very different areas in the United States: the city of Flint, in Michigan, and the Central Valley of California. Water rights and the fight for universal access to clean water are the nexus between these case studies, as Sze demonstrates by dissecting the government-approved policies that resulted in water pollution in both regions. What led to the mishandling of this resource is intrinsically linked with environmental racism, privatization, and neoliberal politics of predation and privation that favored the interests of a few (53). After the discovery that Flint’s water had a dangerously high amount of lead in it, nationwide news outlets reported that the government was not only involved in a cover-up, but also systematically silencing the residents of the city. In the case of the Central Valley, agricultural waste, air pollution, toxic pesticide overexposure and, most importantly, water contamination is—even nowadays—the main reason unincorporated and farmworker communities are incapable of sustaining proper living conditions. In regard to this, Sze asserts that “deregulation/privatization, disposability, and invisibility work together for environmental racism to thrive” (54). The key to understanding this state of affairs is acknowledging the impact of environmental racism, as most of the communities affected by industry-induced hazards are located in low-income, ‘racialized’ neighborhoods. Although this chapter is informative, there could have been a more ‘equal’ exploration of the case studies: both the causes and the repercussions of Flint’s water crisis are thoroughly analyzed, whilst the situation in the Central Valley is not reviewed in as much depth as its counterpart. The author ends this section



with another reflection on art and environmental activism, focusing this time on the importance of storytelling and performance in relation to making excluded voices and polluted bodies the center in their fight for climate and social justice.

The third and last chapter explores restorative environmental justice, which Sze describes as “an analytic based on environmental justice practices, principles, and worldviews” that is influenced by “restorative justice (criminal justice) and restoration ecology” (78). She illustrates this by examining the response of the environmental justice movement to Hurricanes Katrina (New Orleans) and Maria (Puerto Rico), as well as by raising consciousness about the case of Kivalina, an Indigenous village in Alaska that is at risk of sinking due to the decade-long effects of climate change, mainly involving the rapid melting of ice. After Hurricane Katrina, matters such as class, race and privilege were taken into consideration by environmentalists when dissecting the government’s actions—or rather, the lack thereof—regarding disaster planning and evacuation. Similarly, the aftermath of Hurricane Maria pushed people to demand ‘just’ recovery policies (95); in the case of Kivalina, activists all around the world are still fighting for the relocation of the Arctic city. Moreover, Sze criticizes the role of capitalism, neoliberalism and neocolonial politics in maintaining the status quo, as they promote “systemic dispossession, production, extraction, and disability” (81). Even though she mentions that those who suffer the most in the face of climate change are the ones with the least culpability (82), Sze fails to address the power dynamics between the global North and South, especially considering the impact of US foreign policies. The chapter also deals with radical hope and solidarity between communities, and to illustrate her point, Sze examines the role of culture and cultural projects—such as documentaries, movies, websites and music—that fight hyperconsumerism, gas and oil extraction, and environmental racism. She pays special attention to Boots Riley’s 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You*, as it condemns individualism, market-oriented policies and capitalist values.

In the conclusion, the author stresses the intersectional nature of oppression and

its role in climate and social justice. The core of the environmental justice movement relies on imagining a post-capitalist world as well as “challenging the authorities of whiteness, extraction, and violence” (100). Moving past colonial economic and political systems is crucial to understanding the ongoing fight against the systemic—and highly normalized—impact of corporate capitalism, which profits from promoting the despoliation of the Earth’s natural resources, harming both people and the planet. Additionally, Sze underlines how essential it is to uplift the voices of the marginalized through the many expressions of environmental art, as it comprises a fundamental part of the movement by focusing on equality, integrity and the construction of a better future. The chapter ends with a reflection on the environmental justice movement as a way of bringing solidarity between communities and searching for radical hope, environmental optimism and empathy towards more-than-human elements.

Sze’s *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* is a concise and practical introductory piece for anyone who wants to explore the world of the environmental and climate justice movement in the United States. The author manages to convey the many efforts of environmental justice activists and advocates at the frontlines of what she calls ‘moments of danger,’ and she does so by examining—and criticizing—the roots of the problem: extractive capitalism, environmental racism and neoliberal politics. The case studies analyzed throughout the book—Standing Rock, Flint, Central Valley, Hurricanes Katrina and Maria, and the relocation of Kivalina—are fundamental to understanding that, in order to dismantle systems of oppression, the history and lived experiences of those involved in the fight must be centered. Even though the first two chapters seem to be somewhat stronger than the third one, Sze achieves a proper contextualization of the social, political and economic situation of the cases in a thought-provoking manner. Moreover, the concept of restorative environmental justice is particularly interesting, as the author expresses the importance of radical hope, solidarity and freedom in the movement. All in all,



Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger urges its readers to face the reality of the politics of the United States in relation to climate and social justice, activism, art, and inclusivity.

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