

Review: The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy

By Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein (Eds.)

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Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, & Rachel Stein (Eds.). *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2002. 386 pp. ISBN 0-8165-2207-3 (cloth). US\$21.95

The phenomenon of environmental racism was known in the 1970s and before. But it was a protest by African-Americans on a hazardous waste issue in 1982 in Warren County, North Carolina, according to one of the essayists in this reader, which brought both the term *environmental justice* and the issue itself to national attention. A study by the U.S. General Accounting Office of the eight southern states that comprise the Environmental Protection Agency's Region 4 office followed. By 1994, environmental justice had become an official government concern.

The problem of risk from a hazardous substance-producing facility is a double-edged sword. Even as cancer clusters are recognized, towns may be loath to shut down their only employer. Whistleblowers have been harassed in a small town, their children shunned in their schools. The EPA and state environmental departments provide a measure of protection, but only as far as the law allows. Hard data that could be used to convince business owners and politicians is difficult to come by. When entire neighborhoods get sick, fear and uncertainty result.

This reader is, more than anything else, an effort to counter fear and uncertainty. It portrays activists winning battles, artists inspiring children, teachers begetting new activists. In the process, it takes the edges of the issue of environmental racism and stretches them. Like racism in general, environmental racism harms more than just the oppressed. Danger from toxic substances in the environment crosses scientific, economic, political, societal, and religious domains. This reader's nineteen essays are not restricted to any one group or to the United States only, and include many fresh and diverse voices. That is its strength.

The book was being adopted as course reading shortly after publication. This is a testimony to the quality of the many key voices represented here. It is also a testimony to the need for this book in academia. The book is divided into sections on Politics (i.e., public policy), Poetics (literature analysis) and Pedagogy (how to teach environmental justice). Academic theory and

analysis are the tone throughout, resulting in a curious mix of the very personal and the very impersonal. In the 1970s some early environmental racism activists avoided, or even attacked, the broader environmental movement that was perceived as too white and middle class. In this reader the successors to those earlier voices embrace the dialect of the loftiest ivory tower.

To take just one example, Jim Tarter contributes an essay that begins with a moving personal story of his realization that the recurring cancer in his family might be the result of more than a simple genetic predisposition. But the essay is also sprinkled with analysis—were Rachel Carson and Sandra Steingraber feminist? classist? For some readers, such discussion is critical since analysis must precede action; others may find it irrelevant. All the essays contain this kind of analysis, little surprise, as all of the contributors are primarily scholars.

Several essays talk about the issue of risk communication, a vexing problem for health officials. It is frustrating for scientists who do not have adequate data to be pressed to state whether or not contamination x definitely leads to health problem y . It is more frustrating for individuals living in areas where they can see that people are getting sick. Several essays discuss the ways that language, specifically scientific language, can fail to protect people in these cases and suggest ways to approach the problem.

National awareness of the environmental justice movement flowered out of a situation in one poor southern county. Yet the more populous cities of the Northeast and Midwest are the traditional homes of factory-generated hazardous waste; the large farms of the Midwest and West have been pesticide battlegrounds. Toxics now can be found even at the poles—the byproducts of our beloved cars, household cleaners, electronics, and a host of other conveniences associated with civilization. If harmful elements continue to be allowed to disperse throughout the earth's air and water and in our body tissue, the day will come when money is not enough to buy distance from harm. After reading these essays, those thinking they are safe because they do not live in the shadow of a Superfund site or nuclear testing facility will sense the danger getting nearer.

The *Environmental Justice Reader* is indexed, and each essay contains lists of references. The bios of the contributors are by themselves useful for people interested in pursuing a particular topic further.

One correction I would like to mention: Chapter 4 is illustrated with maps generated from one of the most useful data visualization tools available to the general public, the Environmental Protection Agency's EnviroMapper. The

link should be spelled: <http://maps.epa.gov/enviromapper/>

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