

SHARING the EARTH

An International Environmental Justice Reader

Edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Modhumita Roy



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AN INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE READER

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INTRODUCTION

When an explosion in the Union Carbide Chemical Plant in Bhopal, India, killed thousands of people on the night of December 2, 1984, it was regarded as a terrible but singular disaster. When a reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Ukraine in the former Soviet Union exploded just two years later killing an undisclosed number of workers, it was regarded as a terrible but singular disaster. So too when the world learned of the ecological and human cost of decades of petroleum-waste dumping in the Niger Delta by Royal Dutch Shell in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the attempt to privatize water in Bolivia by the Bechtel Corporation in the 1990s, the death of close to two thousand people in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, or even the horrific aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki six decades earlier. Each was regarded as a terrible but singular disaster.

In fact, these and other similar environmental disasters are neither singular nor isolated. Rather, they are clearly interconnected; they are caused by human beings; and they disproportionately negatively impact poor people and women. That is what Environmental Justice as a movement understands. What is often regarded as a natural disaster is upon closer examination the result of sometimes shortsighted and other times reckless—even pernicious—corporate, governmental, or individual environmental practices that target and disadvantage vulnerable groups.

As a concept and a movement now global in scope, Environmental Justice holds that environmental burdens and benefits should be shared equally by all people. It recognizes that currently the negative impacts of ecological devastation, particularly the environmental harm and hazards created by overconsumption of resources in the global North and by elites worldwide, fall disproportionately on the world's poor, the vast majority of whom are people of color, especially women and children. Simultaneously, the benefits of that overconsumption are enjoyed primarily by the privileged around the world, a fraction of the earth's population. Environmental Justice, commonly referred to as EJ, seeks to make these facts visible and to bring people together to work for positive change.

Environmental Justice links two large, foundational bodies of modern thought and activist engagement. It yokes concern for the environment, including all life on the planet, to commitment to social justice: human equity in terms of race, gender, religion, nationality, and class. In the past, environmentalists' advocacy for the preservation of the natural world and healthy habitat for other than human beings

has almost always ignored issues of human justice. The mainstream environmental movement has frequently been charged with overlooking human rights issues in its concentration on conservation, wilderness preservation, and wildlife protection. Likewise, the struggle for human rights and equality has been criticized for seldom taking into account the centrality of the natural world and environmental issues. Environmentalists criticized human justice activists for their lack of concern for the environment and for living forms other than human beings. Environmental Justice bridges the gap between these two movements: environmentalism and human rights advocacy. It not only brings them together for positive change but also shows their inextricable connectedness.

Environmental Justice therefore represents a new, important body of thought and action at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially as people around the world face the realities of climate change, increasing toxicity, resource depletion, and the rapid disappearance of species and arable land on which the health of many human communities depends. Fundamental to both the concept of Environmental Justice and the activist EJ movement is the search for fair ways of sharing environmental burdens and benefits and collectively creating a future in which the dignity and rights of all people are respected. This anthology is titled *Sharing the Earth* to signal that commitment of Environmental Justice to a world order grounded in recognizing that problems have to be borne equally, benefits enjoyed collectively, and solutions arrived at together.

The role of literature is crucial in the struggle for Environmental Justice. From the wisdom of traditional stories passed down over many generations to contemporary activist manifestos that declare resistance and imagine utopias, essays that enumerate environmental and social problems, and poems and narratives that express individuals' critiques and visions, written and spoken words provide invaluable analysis and inspiration. Environmental Justice asks what will motivate people to understand and care about issues and then decide to work for significant change. Giving people information, facts, and data is certainly part of the answer. But the other huge part of the answer is this: the call for Environmental Justice must reach people's hearts, their emotions, their conscience—their spirits as well as their minds. Literature has the ability to do that. Meaningful narrative, powerful images, evocative language, and experientially based arguments are what people respond to, recall, and frequently act on. Words have the power to change human hearts and minds. They can alter what we think, transform how we live, and remind us of what we truly believe and know and cherish, as individuals and as a society. As the renowned EJ activist in India Vandana Shiva states in *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis* (2008): "The transition beyond oil is not merely a technological transition—it is above all a political transition in which we stop being passive and become active agents of transformation by recognizing that we have the capacity, the energy, and the creativity to make the change" (135). The activist literature in this anthology demonstrates the essential role played by language in creating precisely this capacity to imagine radical change and inspire people to become agents of transformation.

The design of *Sharing the Earth* reflects the fact that Environmental Justice is a global principle. Readings come from all parts of the world to emphasize the movement's diversity of voices and issues, while at the same time underscoring commonalities and the equality of disparate cultural expressions. No one place, one voice, or one issue has primacy. Nor is the anthology organized by chronology, region, topic, or nation. Instead, each section of the anthology—"On Whose Shoulders Do We Stand?," "Speaking Up/Speaking Out," and "A World to Win"—intermingles points of view. This arrangement illustrates the range and variety of local conditions, values, and historical contexts, encouraging readers constantly to keep in mind the interconnection of concerns worldwide without losing sight of the specific, the place based, and even the unique.

Similarly, the anthology is not organized by genre. Here too we recognize the importance of not privileging one kind of cultural expression over another. Poems, short fiction, work and protest songs, personal narratives, collective statements, public speeches, oral pieces, and excerpts from theoretical works stand next to each other to assert the value of all kinds of literary communication, some of which necessarily appears here in translation. Further, this arrangement emphasizes the way in which the anthology represents a collective voice for change. In the following pages different perspectives, styles, and rhetorical choices past and present collaborate to create a whole that exhibits the unity without loss of local agency that Environmental Justice as a movement advances.

Part 1 of *Sharing the Earth*, "On Whose Shoulders Do We Stand?," reminds us that Environmental Justice as a concept and a movement does not exist in a vacuum. The term Environmental Justice originated in the 1990s in the United States and gained visibility because of the activism of leaders attending the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., which generated the important document, "Principles of Environmental Justice," reprinted in part 3 of this anthology. That groundbreaking meeting of leaders grew out of the 1982 activism of poor people in Warren County, North Carolina, a mostly African American community, who courageously protested the siting of a highly toxic dump in their area. Even more broadly, the origins of Environmental Justice lie in a number of past struggles for human justice. Some but not all of them had an environmentalist focus. To pay tribute to and learn from that past, the anthology begins with a wide sampling of antecedents by thinkers and activists, some famous and some not, whose ideas and examples prepare the way for EJ as a concept and a movement today. Some of these pieces stand as testimony to the price that past generations have paid because of environmental injustices such as mine disasters, child labor, chattel slavery, and the enclosing of the commons. Other pieces show us predecessors' arguments in favor of radical change and offer visions of a more just and sustainable world that we can still turn to as useful models in the present. Also, looking back reminds us that there are lessons to be learned not only from the successful but also from the failed struggles of the past and that fundamental change often succeeds only after decades or even centuries of collective dedication. Just because we do not see the results of our efforts in our own lifetime does not mean that the effort has been in vain. Indeed,

this first section in the anthology makes the point that we owe it to those who have gone before to persevere.

Part 2, “Speaking Up / Speaking Out,” foregrounds work by contemporary poets, fiction writers, autobiographers, and essayists. As the largest section of the anthology it reflects the abundance of Environmental Justice concerns around the world, revealing the heterogeneity of issues and voices that define the concept and characterize the movement. While some pieces overtly and consciously present an Environmental Justice perspective, others do so more implicitly or indirectly. Every piece, however, contributes a valuable dimension to the overall picture, which exhibits a broad range of classic Environmental Justice concerns. Those include but are not limited to environmental racism, toxic colonialism, eco-imperialism, environmental job blackmail, globalization, biopiracy, military vandalism, land theft, human sacrifice zones, food justice, toxic tourism, unwanted development, and e-waste dumping. Each of these, along with other key concepts, gets defined in a headnote to the particular piece where the concern appears. As in the first part of the anthology, here too selections are deliberately juxtaposed so that the reader navigates between and among regions, issues, time frames, and genres, thereby opening up ways of seeing continuity and overlap as well as contrast. Reading through just the headnotes in part 2 from beginning to end yields an overview of Environmental Justice concepts and struggles around the world in the modern era. For example, the opening selections move from poems about environmental job blackmail and corporate dumping by the Asian American writer Janice Mirikitani to a short story about toxic colonialism by the Malawian writer Steve Chimombo to a poem about military vandalism by the U.S. writer Quan Barry to an excerpt from a novel about caste discrimination and environmentally hazardous employment by the Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand. This type of sequencing continues throughout part 2, emphasizing how much continuity yet breadth exists in contemporary Environmental Justice literature.

The final section, “A World to Win,” focuses on activism. That theme runs throughout the volume, but here it is central and explicit. This section is consciously organized to combat the notion that the problems we face are too large and complex to solve. Fact after fact bombards us about dehumanizing policies and practices. Atrocity after atrocity is called to our attention. Statistic upon statistic impresses us with the magnitude of current injustices. The result can be paralysis, even for those who care passionately about environmental and human justice issues. This final section of *Sharing the Earth* therefore stresses that activism is possible—and it works. People can and do join forces to create change. In this part of the anthology, voices from around the world and across time remind us to keep international coalition and the history of activism with us as we move forward. The courageous Nigerian activist Ken Saro Wiwa, who was executed for his Environmental Justice commitment, declared in his last communication to the outside world in “To Mandy Garner,” reprinted in this section, “We must keep on striving to make the world a better place; for all of mankind. Each one contributing his bit, in his or her own way.” In the same spirit, Cherokee Appalachian writer Marilou Awiakta states in “Grandmother Ishtoua Teaches Wisdoms of the Corn,” also reprinted here: “The corn is

like our people; it draws strength from its clan. A single stalk will bear nothing.” By working together and refusing despair, human beings can create an environmentally just world.

Sharing the Earth reflects faith in political engagement at every level, from grassroots and individual endeavor to state initiatives and international agreements. The anthology also demonstrates that the ethical orientation of Environmental Justice thought and activism comes from many vantage points—secular, spiritual, traditional, experiential—and from all parts of the world. Above all, it testifies to the importance of language. From the anonymous Scottish workers’ song memorializing miners killed in unsafe working conditions in the nineteenth century to the contemporary U.S. poet Roger Sedarat’s meditation on the human and environmental damage manufactured daily in spotless high-tech labs, literature itself stands as a powerful tool in the fight for Environmental Justice. Each piece in the following pages speaks to the imperative of using words to advance positive change.

The word for literature in Sanskrit is *sahitya*. It means that which takes us along, as though on a journey. Thus *sahitya* brings the far near. The voices in this volume impress on us that the far—that which is temporally, spatially, ideologically, and experientially distant—is brought near through empathy, inspiration, identification, and even outrage and anger. The literature collected here makes that ancient truth immediate.

