

CROSSCURRENTS:
URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE
STRUGGLES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation joins the conversation on environmentalism from a humanities perspective that is attentive to the struggle for racial, gender, and class equality in environmental policy and planning. Through an analysis of the works of writers from diverse racial backgrounds spanning the twentieth century—including María Cristina Mena (1893-1965), Jayne Cortez (1936-), Karen Tei Yamashita (1951-), Mark Nowak (1964-), and David Treuer (1970-)—I emphasize that literature’s role in the environmental movement is to inspire human values are crucial for change.

My research contributes to the growing field of ecocriticism, a field born out of the Anglo-American tradition of nature writing that, most recently, has begun to look at representations not only of the natural world in literature but also of the various complex relationships between humans and the land, including land-based arguments concerning social issues of race and gender. Joni Adamson’s groundbreaking work on American Indian literature and environmental justice, as well as Jeffrey Myers’s analysis of the parallel socio-political forces behind racism and environmental destruction depicted in 19th-century American literature, have pushed ecocriticism in the direction of a multicultural study of literature that addresses its practical application in the context of current environmental crises. While my work builds on this new discourse, it by contrast looks beyond recognizable scenes of the natural environment in literature, paying particular attention to the ways in which environmental concerns permeate texts at unsuspecting moments. My purpose is to uncover the powerful, yet often obscured hegemonic forces that affect the everyday construction of racial and environmental subjects in urban spaces.

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PREFACE

Human Values and the Environment

We are participants in the world, with the universe. What we do changes things, and we need to remember this as much as we need to persevere this way, not just as islands in our cultures but with all people knowing that they are part of it and somewhere in their past are the deep channels of memory, the dream water, the tender shoots of green, and the welcome magic of continuing for the tall grasses, our grandchildren, the unborn infants turning like the deer in a mother, a healthy future, right and good, knowing that if we live well, it will welcome us.

—Linda Hogan, from “Dawn for All Time”

Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.

—Mahatma Gandhi

The environmental crisis is palpable today due to popular media regularly discussing global warming and resource depletion. However, for many people in the U.S. and around the world this crisis is and has long been a lived reality of daily struggle for clean air and water, safe working conditions, and access to non-toxic food and land.¹ For these people, there is no apocalypse looming on the distant horizon, but rather immediate environmental devastation that is connected to their social, political, and economic oppression. For many people of color and some poor whites, stories of environmental injustice are commonplace: corporate greed fuels industrial projects that not only harm the natural environments in which they live but also their communities that are often displaced, starved, poisoned, and exploited for labor. Yet these environmental justice stories remain suppressed in mainstream environmental debates, academic discussions, and other discursive spaces dominated by those who hold power through privileged geographic location, race, age, gender, political affiliation, or economic status. This

¹ For arguments and data supporting this material reality of simultaneous ecological and human devastation see, for instance, Shiva (2008), Bullard (1993), and Pellow (2007).

dissertation brings American fictional stories of environmental justice to the foreground of ecocritical study and argues that such stories are necessary to inspire human values that are crucial for social change and restoration of ecological balance.

The U.S. is responsible for approximately 25% of global CO₂ emissions that contribute to climate change, yet makes up only 4% of the world's population.² Our waste, especially that which is hazardous, is transported across oceans to landfills where economically disadvantaged people of color in Brazil, China, and India receive, sort, and bury it in their ground for us.³ Within the U.S., the debate continues over whether the temporary economic security of hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," is worth poisoning local communities with water contaminated with benzene and methane that affects human health and severely impacts biodiversity in the region.⁴ Despite the transparent negative effects of such environmental practices, many of us in a position of privilege in the U.S. are in the habit of overlooking the disseminated and far-reaching consequences of our actions.

One reason for our short-sightedness is that, as Dale Jamieson explains, "[o]ur moral psychologies and reactive attitudes are geared to what we [directly, visibly] do to each other, rather than to what nature does to us even when this is mediated by human agency" (12). Thus, the devastating human and environmental effects of our actions are not taken as seriously as they should be. Additionally, when morality directs us to establish certain laws to protect human and planetary health, it often fails to ensure that

² See Timmons Roberts, p. 196-7, and the U.S. Energy Information Administration brochure.

³ See Pellow, Chapter 4, and Liddick, Chapter 2, for examples.

⁴ See United States Environmental Protection Agency reports at www.epa.gov/hydraulicfracture/ for information on ground water contamination and other environmental risks associated with hydraulic fracturing.

the laws be fully enforced. The Global Health Watch 2005 report asserts that, along with a Universal Declaration of Human Rights that holds governments accountable for providing their citizens with basic rights such as adequate food and safe water, “a moral conception of human rights implies that social, political and economic institutions must also be held to account” (5). The report offers a useful example to underscore the point:

[W]hile a legal right to adequate food is important, and while governments are obliged to ensure the progressive realization of this right, political and economic arrangements that determine how food is produced, controlled and sold may be as important, if not more so, in determining whether this right is fulfilled. Such arrangements might include historically unjust patterns of land ownership; the control of food production systems that leads to monopolies; the speculative hoarding of basic staple foods and excessively high food prices; or the dumping of heavily subsidized produce from rich countries onto poor ones in a way that decimates local agriculture and subsistence economies. (Global Health Watch 5)

Solving environmental problems such as food shortage requires a moral concern for how oppressive social, political, and economic institutions affect the outcome of human environmental rights regardless of governmental policy.

According to Moore and Nelson, “No amount of factual information will tell us what we ought to do [about the environmental crisis]. For that, we need moral convictions—ideas about what it is to act rightly in the world, what it is to be good or just, and the determination to do what is right” (Moore and Nelson xvii). In this dissertation I argue that literature can shape our moral convictions and motivate action

against environmental and social injustices that facilitate planetary ruin. Specifically, I offer justice-focused ecocritical literary analyses of the works of U.S. writers from diverse racial backgrounds spanning the twentieth century in order to engage a cross-cultural dialogue on urgent environmental problems faced by communities of color today.

Chapter One, “Toward an Antiracist Ecocriticism,” introduces a new way of considering the intersection of race and urban environment through the concept of environmental justice. I draw from personal and professional experiences as well as scholarly research to expose the hard fact that, despite recent efforts to diversify the field, racism remains an overwhelming force in ecocriticism that must be directly challenged for both ethical and ecological reasons. I join current U.S. interdisciplinary conversations on sustainability and climate justice while emphasizing the power of stories to spark critical thought and incite compassion in the face of complex and pressing environmental dilemmas. The chapter includes brief literary analyses of poetry by African American jazz lyricist Jayne Cortez, Mexican American author and farmers’ rights advocate Gary Soto, white American labor activist Mark Nowak, and Southasian American scholar and writer Meena Alexander in order to introduce antiracist ecocriticism that will lead into more in-depth analyses in the chapters that follow.

In Chapter Two, “From Desert Dust to City Soot: Environmental Justice and Japanese American Internment in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*,” I consider how present day environmental justice issues in Los Angeles directly connect to World War II Japanese American incarceration. While Yamashita’s novel has in the last few years gained increasing scholarly attention in the field of ecocriticism, the Japanese American characters in *Tropic of Orange* have, by and large, been left out of the

discussion. In this chapter I rely on David Schlosberg's *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism* in developing my theoretical framework and draw on specific accounts of life in the internment camps from the *Densho Archives* in my research. I trace the histories of displacement, ecological destruction, and resistance from internment to contemporary EJ struggles for third and fifth generation Japanese Americans through the characters of Manzanar and his granddaughter Emi.

My third chapter, "Streams of Violence: Colonialism, Modernization, and Gender in María Cristina Mena's Short Fiction," examines the relationship between colonialism and sexual violence in developing urban spaces in early 20th-century Mexico. Reading Mena's "John of God, the Water-Carrier" alongside Andrea Smith's *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* and Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars*, I argue that the political conflict over the modernization of water systems and indigenous rights is rooted in a history of colonialism that specifically targets Native Mexican women. I look specifically at Mena's short stories "The Gold Vanity Set," "The Vine-Leaf," and "A Son of the Tropics" to analyze the intersection of technology, imperialism, and environmental justice in ways that have not yet been addressed in scholarship on Mena. One of my main points is that sites of resistance can be identified in the actions (and narrations) of Mena's less-obvious, peripheral characters who are indigenous women.

Chapter Four offers an environmental justice analysis of Native American fiction set in urban environments, an analysis that is markedly absent in both Native studies and environmental scholarship. This chapter is in part inspired by my own experience working with homeless and low-income Native peoples in Seattle as the coordinator of a community lunch program, actually an inspiration that carries through the dissertation as

a whole. I build on Susan Lobo and Kurt Peters's *American Indians and the Urban Experience*, bringing attention to new ways of reading the environment in Indian literature, moving beyond reading urban environment as simply the traumatic loss of traditional relationships to nature. Through the concepts of hubs, urban land reclamation, homelessness, and environmental job blackmail, I examine works by a range of Native authors, including Simon Ortiz, Louise Erdrich, and Peter bluecloud. The chapter concludes with an examination of David Treuer's *The Hiawatha* that considers job hazards and uneven urban development as important urban environmental justice issues for Indians in the late 20th century.

My dissertation concludes with a brief afterword entitled "Ecocriticism as Theory in the Flesh: Literary Criticism, Pedagogy, and Activism," which points to the pedagogical application of environmental justice literary analyses and highlights activist approaches to teaching literature that close the gap between theory and praxis.

Through the antiracist ecocritical readings of specific twentieth-century American literary texts that I offer in the following pages, I seek to make evident our personal responsibility to the earth and to each other. There needs to be a fundamental change in our human values that dictate the way we treat one another, animals, and the earth. This will only happen if we open our minds and hearts to alternative approaches by listening to stories that can teach us new ways of living with compassion and love for each other and the earth that sustains us.

CHAPTER ONE

Toward an Antiracist Ecocriticism

An all white environmental movement is in itself an environmental crisis.
—The Reverend Jesse Jackson⁵

In summer of 2009, I traveled to Victoria, British Columbia, to attend my first ASLE biennial conference (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment). Upon arrival I trekked across the university's manicured lawns speckled with hundreds of feral rabbits (this was before their rabbit management program which removed them and placed them in sanctuaries), in happy anticipation of finally spending four days with "my people"—people like me who are as much believers as I am in the power of literature and literary criticism to save a planet in peril. Yet the first thing I noticed at registration, and continued to notice in the following days, was how different I was from almost everyone there, or rather, how *white* this conference was. Out of nearly 600 conference participants, I counted the people of color on two hands, four of which, including myself, came to the conference together as part of a panel. Beyond this startling visual representation of whiteness, the content and style of conference papers was also overwhelmingly "white." In other words, many of the papers I listened to offered a perspective from a white person unaware of her/his own privileged racial position. Covert racism pervaded the presentations, and in some cases overt racism, too. Even those papers and panels by white people that explicitly addressed racial themes and issues, with the purpose of promoting diversity and embracing alternative ecocritical analyses, often did so with blatant disregard for the scholarly and experiential perspectives of people of

⁵ Quoted in Novotny, p. 85.

color. In the end, I did not find “my people” at ASLE that year; it was at AAAS (Association of Asian American Studies) a couple of years later that I found them.

A number of ecocritics, white as well as people of color, including Joni Adamson, Jeffrey Myers, Camille Dungy, Elizabeth Ammons, and Kimberly Ruffin, have pointed out and critiqued an ecocriticism that privileges white, male perspectives. Even as the field was just emerging, Cheryll Glotfelty called into question the fact that ecocriticism was “a predominantly white movement” (xxv). Why is it that environmentalism and nature writing in the U.S. are largely accepted as a white movement and tradition despite the obvious fact that environment—natural and humanmade—is experienced by all people regardless of their racial or other differences? This question becomes even more pressing when I consider my experiences as a teacher of environmental theory and literature. On the first class of the semester at a small liberal arts college in New England where I teach, I ask students to create individually a list of non-white nature writers or writers of environmental fiction. Their lists generally contain between zero and three writers who are almost always Native American or African American and usually not women. I am not surprised by these results; it is no secret that students do not encounter writers of color in their courses, in large part because the canon is dominated by the works of white male writers.⁶ I was surprised, however, when I discovered the same phenomenon on an academic online forum for scholars, writers, and teachers of literature and the environment. One well-regarded, prolific participant even suggested that Gary Snyder, the well-known white environmental poet who practices and preaches Buddhism,

⁶ For a discussion of race and the literary canon as it applies to both research and teaching, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s essay “On the Rhetoric of Racism in the Profession.”

was an “Asian American” nature writer. It is indeed a difficult task for most of us to generate a list of Asian American environmental writers, in large part because institutionalized racism, which preserves white power through overt and covert preferential treatment within long-standing social, economic, and political organizations, plays a big role in determining which environmental stories are circulated and critiqued within the academy. Given the fact that institutionalized racism is so pervasive, I believe that we are complicit in perpetuating racism when we don’t insist on expanding the canon to include more writers of color. Moreover, we are, even if inadvertently, severely limiting the discourse on environmentalism to a single cultural and social perspective belonging to white men, which becomes particularly alarming when we consider that half of the world’s population is female and the majority of people globally are not white.

This dissertation joins the growing body of scholarship that examines and seeks to reverse institutionalized racism in the field of ecocriticism.⁷ It also paves the way for an environmental cultural studies that closes the gap between literary criticism and the lived social, political, and cultural realities that impact environmental change. Lastly, I make the case for literature and literary criticism as a necessary cultural project for environmental justice, a movement that over the last decade has evolved into one of the most critical branches of environmentalism in various domains, including government, grassroots environmental organizations, and academia.

Although it is a field born out of the Anglo-American tradition of nature writing, ecocriticism recently has begun to look at representations not only of the natural world

⁷ This includes critical work done by Joni Adamson (2001), Elizabeth Ammons (2010), Alison Deming with Lauret Savoy (2011), Scott Hicks (2011), Jeffrey Myers (2005), T.V. Reed (2002), Kimberley N. Ruffin (2010), and James Tarter (2002).

but also of the various complex relationships between humans and the land, including land-based arguments concerning social issues of race and gender. For example, Joni Adamson's groundbreaking work on American Indian literature and environmental justice, as well as Jeffrey Myers's analysis of the parallel socio-political forces behind racism and environmental destruction depicted in 19th-century American literature, have pushed ecocriticism in the direction of a multicultural study of literature that addresses its practical application in the context of current environmental crises.⁸ In 2000, Karen J. Warren advanced feminist studies in ecocriticism with her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* and, since then, Rachel Stein's study of the role of sexuality and gender in environmental justice activism has propelled the field in exciting new directions.⁹ While there continues to be momentum for the development of gender studies within ecocriticism, comparable analyses in regards to race, particularly those that move beyond a black/white or red/white paradigm, are few and far between. In fact, T.V. Reed's "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism," published over ten years ago, makes one of the most compelling cases to date for addressing racism in ecocritical studies. For this reason and because racism persists, I propose an *antiracist ecocriticism*, a theoretical framework that insists on recognizing and resisting the various subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which scholarship on literature and the environment upholds institutionalized racism.

⁸ See Joni Adamson's *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism* (2001) and Jeffrey Myers's *Converging Stories* (2005). Also, for a useful overview of the field of ecocriticism, see Myers, p. 6-7.

⁹ See Rachel Stein's *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism* (2004).

An antiracist ecocriticism is acutely aware of how the power dynamics of race play out in discursive spaces and seeks to challenge white supremacy not only by parsing and exposing such power dynamics but also by actively shaping discourse to reflect the experiences of people of color. An antiracist ecocriticism includes literary, cultural, and linguistic analyses of life-threatening environmental issues written about, for, and by people of color. It insists that we as scholars, students, teachers, and citizens recognize how racism and resistance to racism as represented in literature reflect and consequently shape cultural values that can either impede or inspire change in the face of environmental crisis. This last point, that literature and criticism as cultural productions can influence societal values such as antiracism, is particularly crucial since, both historically and at the present moment, racism has abetted and continues to allow for ineffective environmental policies that in the long run do more harm than good. Such policies support an agenda of protecting the concentrated wealth of select people in power (that is, predominantly white men) through globalized industry, advanced technologies, urban development, and free-trade markets that use and abuse both the natural environment and underprivileged groups of people, especially people of color, white women and children, and anyone who is poor. These people are exploited for their labor or kept unemployed within a profit-driven economic system, disproportionately poisoned by pollution, and ultimately denied any of the short-term monetary benefits that come from the ruthless extraction, development, and mass distribution of so-called natural resources.¹⁰ Robert Bullard explains how institutionalized racism reinforces a purely monetary valuation of nature in the U.S.:

¹⁰ See José Anazagasty-Rodríguez, p. 101, for more on “capitalist monetary valuation of

The nation was founded on the principles of “free land” (stolen from Native Americans and Mexicans), “free labor” (cruelly extracted from African slaves), and “free men” (white men with property). From the outset, institutional racism shaped the economic, political, and ecological landscape, and buttressed the exploitation of both land and people. (“Anatomy” 16)

By uncovering and examining the racial power dynamics that have shaped U.S. and global environmental history and that continue to dictate environmental policy, an antiracist ecocriticism makes clear that the current environmental crisis is not one of natural ecological occurrences or ineffectual technology, but one of human values.

Race, Urban Space, and Environmental Justice

In a 2010 lecture at the Tufts Institute for the Environment, Dr. Boris Revich from the Russia Academy of Science in Moscow presented data on the effects of climate change and environmental pollution on public health in the Russian arctic and subarctic regions. His data in part pointed to the health effects on the indigenous population, emphasizing that this group is highly susceptible to temperature changes outside the region’s temperature comfort zone and lives closest to sites of dangerous pollution.¹¹ Scientific data like those of Revich have confirmed again and again that climate change is occurring and that it is negatively impacting humans around the globe, with the greatest impact falling on indigenous groups and other communities of color, as well as poor

nature.”

¹¹ See Revich’s publication *Environment and Health Risks: A Review of the Influence and Effects of Social Inequalities*.

whites. Especially impacted are women and children. Take for example Lagos, Nigeria where water has become a scarce commodity, or Roxbury, MA, a predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood in Boston where asthma related to diesel exhaust is disproportionately high in residents.¹² It is imperative that we consider what human values presently allow such communities to suffer water, energy, and health crises, not only because it is morally right to do so, but also because the fate of our children and the planet depends on it.

By paying attention to the experiences of underprivileged populations, a disproportionate percentage of whom are people of color, we can grasp more fully the often-observed human suffering and ecological damage that results from environmental disregard by people in power. Moreover, we can learn from communities of color in particular alternative approaches to combatting such earth-based injustices since, according to Dorceta E. Taylor, “[a]ctivists of color [are] more experientially equipped to perceive the injustice in the distribution of environmental hazards and envision a world where these burdens would be eliminated, reduced, or, where unavoidable, distributed equitably in the future” (“Environmentalism” 54). For example, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON)—an organization devoted to human rights, biodiversity conservation, and protection against environmental contaminants—has founded several internationally recognized projects that range from local sustainable development workshops to researching the environmental experiences and struggles of indigenous people of the Arctic to advocating indigenous participation in environmental

¹² See Penn Loh’s study on asthma and diesel exhaust in Roxbury (2012), and ActionAid’s 2006 report on urban flooding and climate change in Africa.

legislation.¹³ In Nigeria, communities have built their homes on stilts to protect them from unnatural flooding. Residents of Roxbury have come together in the organization ACE (Alternatives for Community and Environment) to set up an air quality monitor and outlaw idling at a local bus depot. As Barbara Johnston stresses, “[T]he life-and-death struggles of people in the distant corners of this planet are struggles that matter: to those involved, to those intimately and distantly responsible, and to the many who will, unless lasting solutions are found, experience similar difficulties sooner or later” (10). Activists’ stories empower individual communities fighting for environmental justice across the globe and wake up privileged others to the fact that the earth’s resources must be appreciated beyond their monetary value and shared equally among everyone if we are to survive as a species.

As Bullard’s scholarship reveals, despite the contributions of both racism and classism to environmental degradation (the two are in fact interrelated social injustices), the targeting of people of color for environmental hazards occurs in both economically advantaged and disadvantaged communities, a specific form of discrimination Bullard refers to as “environmental racism.”¹⁴ However, in his research on environmental racism, Bullard does not focus solely on discriminatory siting and intentionality but also studies the longstanding structural forms of racism that infiltrate—often imperceptibly—everyday life and, as a result, become articulated in those specific sites of environmental degradation and racial discrimination.¹⁵ Like Bullard, Laura Pulido emphasizes that an

¹³ See *RAIPON*.

¹⁴ See Bullard, “Anatomy,” 17, 21.

¹⁵ See Bullard’s “Environmental Justice: It’s More Than Waste Facility Siting.” See also Pulido’s “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California.”

individual act or site of environmental racism is not necessarily malicious or singularly motivated, but is rather “informed by regional and/or national racial discourses, and [in turn] informs and reproduces racial discourses and structures at higher scales” (15).

Antiracist ecocriticism importantly participates in this examination of racism on both localized and broad scales in order to show that environmental degradation and social injustice are intricately bound.

Although race is a social concept, it is also the cause of very real, material ecological inequalities. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain, “we tend to view race as something fixed and immutable—something rooted in ‘nature.’ Thus we mask the historical construction of racial categories, the shifting meaning of race, and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping race relations” (17). These very same politics and ideology that form race relations play a role in environmental policy and planning, as environmental justice makes clear. With its emphasis on how—through unjust environmental planning, regulation, and enforcement—minority groups are targeted for the most severe negative impacts of natural disasters, hazardous waste disposal, industrial pollution, risky technologies, and uneven urban development, environmental justice as a concept and movement lays the foundation for antiracist ecocriticism. The U.S. environmental justice movement emerged in the early 1980s and gained momentum with the United Church of Christ’s 1987 publication *Toxic Waste and Race*, a report that exposed the targeting of people of color for placement of toxic waste sites in their communities. In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., drew up seventeen principles of environmental justice that inspired a new environmental consciousness grounded in human rights. The preamble to

the principles highlights the explicit targeting of people of color in the U.S. for negative environmental impacts since European colonization and asserts their basic human right to spiritual, cultural, economic autonomy and wellbeing, as well as physical safety and health:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice

(“Principles”)

Underlying the “Principles of Environmental Justice” is the belief that the environmental health of our planet can be measured by the health and wellbeing of its peoples, since the two depend on triumph over the same oppressive forces, including colonialism and industrial capitalism. Such oppressive institutions rely on structural racial discrimination

in the maintenance of a multi-class system that generates high profits for one group at the expense of other groups.

Despite overwhelming empirical data that confirm the correlation between racial justice and earth sustainability,¹⁶ some critics of the environmental justice movement argue that at its core it is a social movement that usurps exigent environmental issues for political gain. While many regulators, industry leaders, and politicians have acknowledged the inherent worthiness of considering justice and equality in their environmental decision-making, others find that this kind of consideration for underprivileged communities is an obstacle to real environmental change. For instance, according to Christopher H. Foreman, Jr.,

[F]or many activists, environmental justice is mostly about accountability and political power rather than the more technical issue of environmental risks facing communities. A major reason why one simply cannot accept advocacy claims of risk at face value is that they are often anchored, ultimately, not in the dangers posed by a site or substance ostensibly at issue, but rather in a desire for transformed power relationships to be achieved on behalf of politically energized and engaged communities. (58-9)

Yet, as I have been arguing, “transforming power relationships” is the necessary first step for transforming societal values, such as racism, that sanction ongoing unsustainable practices by people in power. The environmental “dangers” to which Foreman refers are

¹⁶ See Kristin Shrader-Frechette (2002), Robert Bullard (1990; 1993), David Naguib Pellow (2007), David Schlosberg (1999), and edited volumes by Dorceta E. Taylor (2010), Ronald Sandler with Phaedra Pezzullo (2007), and Barbara Rose Johnston (1997), for example.

in fact *not* “posed by a site or substance” but rather by those people who put them there. And these dangerous sites and substances—toxic waste sites, incinerators that emit particulate matter, diesel car exhaust—are a matter of life or death for the many people of color who are battling cancer, respiratory illnesses, liver and kidney disorders, and autoimmune diseases.¹⁷ As Tim Hayward explains,

A human right to an adequate environment does not preclude the taking of other, complementary, approaches to environmental and ecological problems. . . . It should not be forgotten, after all, that even when environmental concern focuses on the good of nonhumans, its success depends on the political, economic, and legal resources available to the humans pressing the case (35)

Although environmental justice reorients environmentalism toward a focus on humans and their habitat—something which conservationists like Foreman worry detracts from the important work of preserving natural resources and landscapes from human pollution—this seemingly anthropocentric approach in fact places the responsibility of environmental degradation on humans whose morality has woefully failed them. If human values shift, so too will the political, economic, and legal decisions that directly affect the environment for all life, human and other than human.

After the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, the environmental justice movement expanded its definition of “environment” to include the places where people live, work, and play in order to protect a person’s right to a healthy

¹⁷ See Ming-Ho Yu, et al., *Environmental Toxicology: Biological and Health Effects of Pollution*.

and safe environment at all times.¹⁸ This modification recognizes that environmental hazards are not always transparent: they seep into our air, soil, and water whether we live in the city or in rural areas; they include violations of cultural, place-based security; and their far-reaching detrimental effects often are detectable only over long periods of time and across multiple, seemingly disparate natural and humanmade environments.¹⁹ Since these often invisible environmental hazards disproportionately target people of color, many of whom live and work in cities, an antiracist ecocriticism carefully considers urban space in its study of literature and environment.

In his acknowledgment of the interdependence of urban and rural landscapes, where he considers urban landscape as fundamentally rural landscape transformed by humans, Lawrence Buell explains, “No treatment of environmental imagination can claim to be comprehensive without taking account of the full range of historic landscapes, landscape genres, and environmental(ist) discourses” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 8). Built environments and their inhabitants exist as part of ecosystems, which is a perspective helpful to understanding not only the role of urban life and culture in the fight for environmental preservation, but also how environmental disasters play out in urban environments, targeting their most vulnerable populations.²⁰ Further, I stress that it is

¹⁸ See “Environmental Justice,” United States Environmental Protection Agency.

¹⁹ Gordon Walker argues that the impacts of environmental hazards targeting marginalized communities cannot be assessed merely through census data and proximity measures because these particular communities are often excluded from census data and because the dispersion of pollutants is complex and unpredictable. Even more significant, he argues that “pollution is socially contextualized,” meaning that the psycho-social impacts of living with environmental hazards must be taken into account along with physiological factors for a diverse range of people (29).

²⁰ The concept of built environments as part of ecosystems is explained further by David Harvey, who writes, “flows of money and of commodities [which run through urban centers and largely control the protection and distribution of natural resources] and the

crucial to look at the spaces where environmental concerns seem less obvious; just as we don't usually think of skyscrapers when "environment" is mentioned, we also don't usually think of "environmental issues" as including poor black communities fighting against the placement of an incinerator in their neighborhoods. Yet both of these examples constitute very important environmental issues in need of scholarly attention.

Recognizing these issues, Michael Bennett calls for a new ecocriticism that is concerned with urban environments:

The challenge which social ecocriticism offers to [the] rural focus of deep ecocriticism is of a parcel with the environmental justice movement's effort to reconceptualize the notions of 'habitat preservation' and 'endangered species' to include the homes of inner-city people of color and their inhabitants, whose lives are threatened by the results of 'environmental racism.' ("From Wide Open Spaces" 303)

While my dissertation focuses on urban space, it does not assume that this is the only place where people of color live, nor does it preclude antiracist ecocritical analyses that involve rural environments. I pay attention to environmental justice struggles in cities because this is where the challenges faced by communities of color—including Asian Americans and especially Native Americans, two groups that are often overlooked in urban space analyses—and environmental problems in general are frequently ignored. Michael Bennett explains this parallel invisibility of race and environment in terms of the "spatialization of race": "One might argue that it was precisely because racism went underground or, more accurately, *into* the ground through the spatialization of race—that

transformative actions of human beings (in building of urban systems, for example) have to be understood as fundamentally ecological processes" (392).

it became invisible and in some ways more pernicious” (“Manufacturing” 172). People of color are concentrated in cities and often live in poverty there due to residential segregation, discrimination in employment, dependence on public transportation, displacement as a result of corporate development, and government-sponsored relocation programs. As a result, many urban communities of color face the harshest environmental conditions at home and at work—lead-painted surfaces, poor waste and sanitation systems, contaminated water, polluted air—and yet these conditions frequently go unnoticed since the complex architecture of cities tends to obscure the connections among space, race, and power.²¹

While many cities across the U.S. recently have invested in “green” initiatives such as building community parks, introducing recycling programs, and encouraging carpooling, many of these programs do not address the daily environmental struggles of poor communities of color. They also fail to acknowledge cultural differences, a necessary step that may facilitate or impede these employed environmental programs. In response to a question about “green” ecocriticism and urban ecosystems, Andrew Ross explains in an interview how the greening of cities has had a positive, direct impact on the material environment, but laments that these processes are focused on physical use of land, rather than on social, economic, and cultural aspects, that affect the material environment:

[S]houldn't a green outlook on urbanism include attention to the redistribution of wealth, de facto racial desegregation, extension of

²¹ See also George Lipsitz's “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape” and Edward Soja's *Seeking Spatial Justice*.

community board power, safeguarding of public services and education, reforms of political decision-making at city, state, and federal levels, and the like? Unless you attend to these social features you can't fully understand the effects upon the material environment. Nor can you understand the culture of cities, the folklore and psychology of urbanism, the local humor, human loyalties, and so on, which are even less conventionally the objects of green criticism. (18)

The antiracist ecocriticism I offer in this dissertation specifically directs our attention to hidden, frequently overlooked instances of environmental injustice and resistance in U.S. urban spaces to engage readers in a values-based discussion of urgent environmental problems we face today. In particular, I argue that multiracial literatures push us to consider the complex and integrated roles of race, class, and gender disparities in environmental degradation and to embrace new values of antiracism and compassion necessary for fundamental change.

The Power of Literature

It is this paralysis in the face of [environmental] disaster, this fear before the beast, that would cause someone looking from the outside to say that we face a crisis of character. It is not a crisis of policy or of law or of administration. We cannot turn to institutions, to environmental groups, or to government. If we rise in the night, sleepless, to stand at the ship's rail and gaze at the New World under the setting moon, we know we are thousands of miles from home, and that if we mean to make this a true home, we have a monumental adjustment to make, and only our companions on the ship to look to.

—Barry Lopez, from *The Rediscovery of North America*

The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible.

—bell hooks, from *Outlaw Culture*

As a humanist working in environmental studies, I am often asked what literary analysis can contribute to the environmental movement. The sciences, social sciences, engineering, and technology all have clear roles when it comes to assessing and solving environmental problems, but where do the arts and humanities fit in? I argue that literature has the unique power to document, illustrate, inspire, and instruct in the face of environmental crisis, particularly if we adopt an antiracist, environmental justice framework. Fearing that attention to analytical frameworks can “obstruct the immediate remediation of life and death situations,” the environmental justice movement has been slow to incorporate cultural theory and textual analysis (Sze 32). Yet theory actually does the needed work of evaluating the efficacy of antiracist and environmental practices. Ecocriticism in particular is a powerful tool for uncovering the workings and origins of human values that foster both environmental devastation and sustainability.

Julie Sze asserts that “[q]uestions, philosophies, and ideologies *do* matter—it is through cultural discourses (that construct meaning and value) that policies and ‘life or death’ matters become enacted and material conflicts staged” (33-4). Simon Estok similarly maintains, “Praxis—real praxis—starts with theoretical connections that allow us to see how we participate in the systems we critique” (204). Still, literary study as an important and in fact necessary cultural project has been forced to defend itself in the recent age of postmodern nihilism, expanding technological and scientific discourse, and capital-driven

(as opposed to values-driven) education models.²² Now, more than ever, ecocriticism needs to demonstrate why and how literature is relevant to our daily lives.

Literature has the power to incite social change, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which President Lincoln famously attributed to instigating the U.S. Civil War that ultimately abolished slavery, to Rachel Carson's fabled opening of *Silent Spring* (1962), which brought for the first time the dangers of pesticide use to the awareness of the national public. According to Jonathan Gottschall, fiction can be, ironically, "more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is *designed* to persuade through argument and evidence" (150). He cites the research of psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock, which confirms that "the more absorbed readers are in a story, the more the story changes them" (151). Elizabeth Ammons emphasizes the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual impact of literature: "Words on the page reach more than our minds. They call up our feelings. They call out our spirits. They can move us to act" (172). Unlike other discourses and disciplines, literature and the arts often surprise us by evoking feelings we have never felt before and introducing perspectives we have never seen before, consequently changing us, and our courses of action, in both small and big ways.

Indeed, there is a long history of literature as a tool for teaching, inspiring, and facilitating morality in human societies. Religions around the globe, for example, have always employed storytelling, as Gottschall explains: "The world's priests and shamans knew what psychology would later confirm: if you want a message to burrow into a human mind, work it into a story" (118). While stories (primarily fiction and poetry) and

²² See Ammons, Ch.1, for a critique of postmodern fundamentalism and Nussbaum, Ch.2, for a discussion of for-profit versus for-democracy education models.

the arts often depict irresponsible behavior, Gottschall argues that fiction actually enforces, rather than breaks down, morality: “Yes, evil occurs, and antiheroes, from Milton’s Satan to Tony Soprano, captivate us. But fiction virtually always puts us in the position to judge wrongdoing, and we do so with gusto” (130). By engaging the imagination in life-like moral dilemmas, stories evoke empathy for those people—whether imaginary or real—who experience life differently from the reader. Martha Nussbaum, who makes the case for the humanities being essential to democracy, asserts that “[c]itizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone” (95). She emphasizes the importance of having “[t]he ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (95-6). Literature evokes empathy that in turn influences our morality. As psychologist Martin L. Hoffman argues, “[e]mpathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible” (3).²³ This process of morality-making through fiction is essential to the environmental justice movement because greed, racism, and apathy have led to corrupt policies and practices that permit disproportionate harm to fall on certain communities.

In addition to evoking empathy, literature helps us parse and respond to a dynamic world facing intricate environmental problems by weaving and layering multidimensional issues into a single narrative. Jayne Cortez’s “Talking About New Orleans” offers an example of this. The poem invites the reader to draw connections

²³ See Hoffman’s *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (2000) in which he makes the case for empathy playing a significant role in moral development, supported by over three decades of research.

across seemingly incongruent social, political, and environmental issues—all related to Hurricane Katrina and its devastating aftermath:

Is this freedom is this global warming is this the new identity
me riding on a refrigerator through contaminated debris
talking to no one in particular
about a storm that became a hurricane
& a hurricane that got violent and started
eyeballing & whistling & stretching toward
a category three domination that caught me in
the numbness of my own consciousness
unprepared, unprotected and
made more vulnerable to destabilization
by the corporate installation of human greed, human poverty
human invention of racism & human neglect of the environment (lines 72-
83)

Cortez presents side by side the concept of global warming and the image of, presumably, herself—a black woman—barely surviving the storm with the help of a floating refrigerator to highlight the unlikely connection between climate change and racial discrimination. The refrigerator symbolizes the complexity of environmental issues in a swiftly urbanizing world; in depicting the refrigerator as a lifesaving raft, Cortez captures the refrigerator’s economic and social value as a food preserver for the poor at the same time she draws attention to the fact that it adds to the flow of contaminated debris. Her interwoven questions about “freedom,” global warming, and “identity” eventually lead

into the larger question of what the *real* disaster is: a hurricane comprised of multiple threads of long-standing “domination,” including “the corporate installation of human greed, human poverty / human invention of racism & human neglect of the environment” that specifically place the poet and hurricane survivors who share aspects of her identity at risk because of their skin color and gender (lines 72, 78, 82-3).

Cortez’s multidimensional perspective on Hurricane Katrina parallels the environmental justice movement itself, as many scholars, including environmental sociologists David Schlosberg (1999) and Dorceta E. Taylor (1993), have argued for alliance building and plurality within the movement.²⁴ In this way, resources among various groups can be shared and consolidated, and the dynamism of environmental problems can be met with more comprehensive, nuanced solutions. Similarly, the effect of many stories joining together into a single narrative of environmental change also serves to bring people together around a single cause, one that affects us all and is critical to our survival. Gottschall asserts, “Story—sacred and profane—is perhaps *the* main cohering force in human life. A society is composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas. What connects us beyond our kinship ties? Story. . . . Story is the counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart” (138). At a time when the tendency of things to fall apart feels very much beyond our control in a rapidly disintegrating environmental landscape, it is even more crucial that people work together.

Stories that depict issues around which people come together in solidarity also spark cooperation in envisioning creative solutions to intricate environmental problems.

²⁴ See also Gordon Walker, 26-7, for a discussion of the expansion of the environmental justice movement to account for such vast complexities.

Part of this process demands that readers comprehend history and their relation to it. According to Noël Carroll, narrative is “probably the most pervasive tool that humans have for relating the past to the present and to the future. And it is because narrative functions to relate the past and the present, on the one hand, to the future, on the other hand, that it comes to play a role in deliberating about what we will do and in planning for what is ahead” (50). Creative thinking and hopeful imagining must accompany critical thinking if we are to solve overwhelming environmental problems. Melissa Leach, Ian Scoones, and Andy Stirling call on government and institutions to adopt ways of thinking that embrace “nonlinearity, complexity, heterogeneity, uncertainty, ambiguity and surprise” (34), since these most accurately reflect the reality of dynamic and multifaceted environmental conditions today:

Environmental conditions are changing fast as water, land and other ecological systems interact with climate change and new patterns of disease. Developments in science and technology are proceeding faster than ever, with the spread of technologies shaped by new and often highly globalized patterns of investment and information. Social systems are changing rapidly too, linked to population growth, urbanization and market relationships. Such dynamics are, in turn, driven by shifting patterns of mobility—of people, practices, microbes, ideas and technologies—and globalized economic change, as some areas of the world transform, while others remain in deep poverty. . . . Yet the policies and institutions that have to deal with this new dynamic context are often

premised on are more static views of the world. . . [where] assumptions of stability, equilibrium and predictable, controllable risks dominate. (1)

Narrative offers one important way of confronting “sustainability challenges in a dynamic world” and of calling for innovative approaches to thinking about, researching, and solving environmental problems.

Most significantly, stories give voice to a diverse range of people, a specific struggle within the environmental justice movement itself. *Anyone* can tell a story—it is an important form of communication that exists in all cultures. Likewise, *anyone* can listen to and respond to a story. That storytelling is an inclusive, not exclusive act, means that more people—including non-scientists, non-academics, and people coming from a wide range of social, political, and cultural experiences—can participate in the environmental debate. Currently, the environmental movement is dominated by Western scientific discourse, or what Robert J. Brulle calls a “technocratic value-neutral discourse” (274). This discourse accepts existing socio-political structures of society and looks to solve environmental problems solely through an advanced scientific and technological approach. Such an approach, according to Brulle,

obscures consideration and discussion of the social causes of ecological degradation. It also removes moral consideration from public policy discussions. Finally, it serves as an ideology that limits the participation of citizens in ecological discussions. (274)

Literature engages a humanist discourse that is inclusive, accessible, and invested in moral development and critical inquiry, a discourse that is necessary for solving environmental problems.

Not only do we need to incorporate humanities and arts discourse into environmental studies, but we must also acknowledge alternative scientific knowledge from various cultures that may add to or be at odds with white Western scientific research. In *Red Earth, White Lies*, Vine Deloria, Jr., discredits Western scientific knowledge and insists on Indian cultural understandings of the earth that not only support human justice and equality but also offer concrete approaches to environmental preservation. He explains that many American Indian tales are “deliberately constructed to preserve [information about true environmental events] as well as entertain” (232). An antiracist ecocriticism listens to and takes seriously the wide range of environmental experiences coming from different racial groups, appreciating the environment as a cultural formation that is ever-present in our literatures whether or not it is explicitly named. It is aware of the fact that, in the words of Rob Novotny, “[t]he language used to refer to the environment is rich with cultural connotations, laden with the history of social relations and struggles between peoples” (86). It recognizes that environmental problems are complex and experienced differently by different people, and that all experiences must be taken into consideration when coming up with solutions, as Novotny emphasizes:

An African-American woman in the public housing projects of the south side of Chicago is going to think much differently (though perhaps no *less*) about the environment than a lawyer with the Environmental Defense Fund in New York. A Laotian fishing family in Oakland is much differently situated to think about the environment than an urban planner

in San Francisco or a graduate student shopping at a grocery cooperative in Berkeley. (86)

Through literature we can discover multiple sides to the story of environmental devastation and renewal, a process that will contribute to a more comprehensive and impartial understanding of how ecological breakdown occurs and what we can do to address it.

Borrowing Mary Parker Follett's concept of "unity without uniformity," David Schlosberg argues that the environmental justice movement must embrace a pluralist approach if it is to be successful:

Diverse people come with different stories of injustice, with varying emphases on equity, recognition, capabilities, and/or participation. It is common to see those with different experiences of environmental injustice sharing stories. Through participation and recognition—two key elements of justice itself—those who are distant and many circles away become much closer. This reflexive engagement—ecological and otherwise—is what had brought unity, without uniformity, to many of the diverse groups attached to national and global networks. (184)

Literature exposes the range of environmental issues for dissimilar people and invites the reader to engage in this important process of recognition and participation. Antiracist ecocriticism fosters the exchange and appreciation of many different kinds of environmental justice stories.

To bring this chapter to a close, let me provide three brief examples of antiracist ecocritical analysis of contemporary U.S. works, including poems by Gary Soto, Mark Nowak, and Meena Alexander. These will introduce the more detailed antiracist ecocritical analyses that I offer in later chapters of this dissertation.

Gary Soto's "Mission Tire Factory, 1969" portrays life-threatening conditions for Mexican American factory workers in northern California during a pivotal time when Chicano/a civil rights activists were fighting for education reform, bilingual voting ballots, women's reproductive rights, immigrant rights, and fair wages.²⁵ A third-generation Mexican American, Soto grew up working alongside his family on farms in the San Joaquin Valley and later in the industrial factories of Fresno, CA. As a young adult he became involved in the United Farm Workers of America, which is one of the most widely recognized organizations committed to environmental justice today (Soto, Preface 1-4). Less known are the environmental justice struggles of Mexican American urban factory workers which Soto depicts in his poem:²⁶

All through lunch Peter pinched at his crotch,
And Jesús talked about his tattoos,
And I let the flies crawl my arm, undisturbed,
Thinking it was wrong, a buck sixty-five,
The wash of rubber in our lungs,

²⁵ For a comprehensive history of the Chicano/a Movement, see Francisco Arturo Rosales's *Chicano!: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*.

²⁶ Following the U.S. Bracero Program (1942-1964), which brought Mexican laborers to work on farms in the U.S. through a government contract, companies continued to hire undocumented Mexican immigrants at well-below minimum wage. As a consequence, many second and third generation Mexican Americans moved from their farm jobs to work in urban factories, where wages were only slightly better.

The ovens we would enter, squinting
—because earlier in the day Manny fell
From his machine, and when we carried him
To the workshed (blood from
Under his shirt, in his pants)
All he could manage, in an ignorance
Outdone only by pain, was to take three dollars
From his wallet, and say:
“Buy some sandwiches. You guys saved my life.” (Soto 10)

Soto paints a picture of clear violations of environmental justice: low wages, polluted air, and dangerously hot ovens. Perhaps the most distressing example of these hazardous working conditions is Manny’s fall from one of the factory machines. Manny’s offer to buy his friends lunch for “saving his life,” is a gesture Soto deems “ignorant” because it reveals Manny’s willingness to value his friends at a price significantly above that paid by his own life doing dangerous work for the derisory wage of “a buck sixty-five” (lines 11, 4). The camaraderie formed among these coworkers signifies a quiet resilience to the long-standing institution of environmental racism. Beneath the unaffected, everyday conversation and unremarkable physical movements of the three friends depicted in the poem’s opening lines remains their shared unspoken thoughts about how “it [their low wage, the contaminated air, Manny’s fall] was wrong” (line 4).

Mark Nowak’s “\$00 / Line / Steel / Train” offers another example of poetry that explicitly addresses race and worker’s rights in the context of urban industrial labor. Like Soto, Nowak’s inspiration for writing comes from personal experience, in his case

growing up as a white man of Polish descent in late 1970's and early 80's Buffalo, New York, during the time of deindustrialization. After years of environmental injustice suffered by factory workers there, the systematic shutting down of plants resulted in devastating layoffs (Nowak, "Interview"). In the following excerpt from "\$00 / Line / Steel / Train," Nowak describes the experiences of white workers at the Bethlehem Steel Mill in Pennsylvania that paralleled those of his family members and Polish immigrant ancestors in Buffalo:

When we were kids we thought the steel mill was it. The (scrape) wage of labor (scraping by). **We'd seen the men comin' out, all dirty, black.** **The only thing white was the goggles over their eyes.** "[S]till more important is the idea that the pleasures of whiteness could function as a 'wage' for white workers." **We thought they were it, strong men.** (The missing word is white.) **We just couldn't wait to get in there. When we finally did get in, we were sorry. (Chuckles.) It wasn't what it was cut out to be.** (lines 1-8)

Here, Nowak quotes scholar David Roediger discussing W.E.B. Du Bois's "The White Worker" in *Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935, which argues that even when white workers received unlivable wages just like their black counterparts, they were compensated by a "public and psychological wage" (Du Bois 700). By quoting Roediger, Nowak emphasizes that the disillusionment of these children of steelworkers stems from their privileged position as white people, a perspective Nowak represents with "white" goggles (line 3). In reality, there is nothing romantic or glorifying about working in a steel mill, as the white men eventually discover when they start working there as adults.

Yet Nowak doesn't necessarily erase their privilege when he reveals that the work is not "what it was cut out to be" (lines 7-8). To the contrary, his inserted "chuckle" dismisses the idea that steel work is the great equalizer among workers who all leave "dirty, black" at the end of the day (lines 7, 2). What he seems to be saying is that racism isn't good for anybody, white or black.

The backdrop of Nowak's depiction of black/white race relations, urban industrial development, and labor rights is Steelton, Pennsylvania, the city where Bethlehem Steel, one of the largest steel companies in the country, was established. According to historical record, a clear racial hierarchy existed within the steel mill:²⁷

In the departments where labor was the least skilled and working conditions the harshest, the men were mainly foreign born. Of 159 men surveyed in the blast furnace, 123 were either Slavic or black. Of 419 men studied in the open-hearth furnace, 325 were either foreign born or Negro. In departments requiring skilled or less physical labor, such as the machine shop, only 9 blacks and immigrants were among the nearly 250 surveyed. And these few were usually "helpers."

...

The United States Immigration Commission classifies all workers earning under \$1.50 a day as unskilled and all earning over that amount as skilled. . . . [Skilled workers] included the Irish (75 percent), the German (60 percent) and the Negro (59 percent). In 1910 fewer than one-half of the Italians and Slavs were in this category. (Bodnar 37)

²⁷ Bodnar's data comes from a survey by the United States Immigration Commission from 1910.

Over the next half-century, the segregated departments persisted, even though they shifted slightly in composition. After WWI, the Great Migration brought an influx of black workers from the South.²⁸ When European immigration was halted in 1921, steel companies, with the support of the U.S. Congress, secured a contract with the Mexican government to hire Mexican laborers to work in the mills for extremely low wages.²⁹ An analysis that foregrounds history is vital to seeing the big picture of how all the various social, political, and environmental elements of a story intersect in Nowak's poem. Moreover, when we place Nowak's poem about white and black steel workers in conversation with Soto's poem about Mexican American factory laborers, we gain awareness of the Mexican American absent-presence in Nowak's steel mills.

In contrast to these poems about the harsh working conditions of U.S. factories of the 20th century, Southasian American writer Meena Alexander's "Great Brown River" centers on the river that carries the toxic industrial waste of these factories and ties the environmental devastation to a history of colonialism. Alexander explains that the poem was inspired while walking along the Mississippi River, a river she had read about in her youth in India and Sudan but that here she leaves unnamed ("Accidental Markings" 132). Documenting environmental degradation along the Mississippi River, Alexander's poem depicts the rising up of brown-skinned ancestors from the depths of polluted ground to "swarm" the waters in resistance to environmental injustice. Alexander begins by

²⁸ For more on African American migration and industrial labor history see, for example, Peter Gottlieb.

²⁹ During the Great Depression thousands of these Mexican steel workers were repatriated to Mexico. For this early 20th-century history of Mexican American industrial workers, see Zaragosa Vargas.

describing the brown river marked with foam (an indicator of pollution) and by identifying her own life as a part of the river:

This river without a name
I live by:
a great brown river
flecked with foam
where few birds call (lines 1-5)

The expression “I live by” is not just a geographical description of where Alexander lives but also a statement of the means by which she lives, since river water is a life-source.

Next, Alexander references the defunct railroad that runs alongside the river:

There are freight cars
tethered to the trees
their metal holds
marked *Burlington Northern*
marked *Milwaukee* (lines 6-10)

“There are freight cars / tethered to the trees” is a line that is both literal and figurative, with “freight” and “tethered” suggestive of the long-lasting environmental impacts of the railroad industry, including a legacy of unjust working conditions for railroad laborers, significant air and land pollution, extensive land-clearing for the construction of the railroads, and facilitation of unsustainable practices in production and trade made possible by high speed transportation of goods over long-distances.

The third stanza catalogs the “debris of unnumbered lives”—a mixture of human-generated waste—hidden in the crevices of the timeworn railroad tracks in order to emphasize the invisibility of all the litter:

In the pitch black holes
between the rails,
debris of unnumbered lives,
tin cans, chipped glass
worn car tires,
the body of a dead hawk
its wings clapping
in a dry wind
that jars the river silt
batters the freight cars
till out of the blind holes
ancestors wake: (lines 11-22)

By calling the litter “debris” rather than “waste,” Alexander stresses their origin in disaster, not only an environmental disaster, but also a disaster of human values. Moreover, the imagery of wind in the final four lines of the stanza ties the seemingly disparate elements—the flapping hawk, crumbling river silt, and pummeled freight cars—together through violence, revealing a network of eco-connections that ultimately jostles the ancestors out of their sleep and into action.

When the ancestors come to life, Alexander likens their brown skin to the color of the water—“their flesh is brown / as river water” (lines 23-4)—in order to underscore not

only the fact that people of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental disasters and that social and environmental issues are intertwined, but also the cultural significance of water in general. The color shared by the people and the water implies a deeper cultural relationship between communities of color and the environment, as has been explained by environmental thinkers such as Vandana Shiva.³⁰ In quick contrast, Alexander also connects their brown skin to a history of unjust working environments for Asian Americans: “sugarcane stubble / iron bits, cut cord / laced to their skin” (lines 25-7). These lines refer explicitly to the inhumane treatment of coolies on the sugarcane plantations of the West Indies and Hawaii in the 19th century, the forced labor of Chinese and other Asian immigrants who built railroads in the U.S., and the long hours and deplorable pay for Asian American garment factory workers in the 20th century.

Such environmental injustices throughout history lead up to one of the most critical environmental concerns in the world today: the commodification of water. This environmentally destructive trend is alluded to by Alexander in the following lines:

Arms braced
they prevent me
from the musical gardens
of the rich,
well-lit fountains,
signs swaying above
this city

³⁰ For the cultural the significance of rivers, as tied to survival and especially in the context of global spaces where brown people live, see Vandana Shiva’s *Water Wars*.

like a child's

cut outs:

Best Flour Pillsbury,

Satin Smooth Tips,

Buy Life Insurance. (lines 28-39)

Alexander ties the decorative garden fountains of the elite to billboard advertisements in order to draw our attention to the privatization and commercialization of water, which has had devastating effects on humans, animals, and the natural environment globally.³¹

The poem's final lines continue this global environmental perspective—acknowledging that the “great brown river” is in fact not an isolated example of environmental and human degradation:

As they [the ancestors] swarm into water

dragging the railroads behind,

I realize this river

will round the earth,

a whole globe seething

with words.

The waves are swords. (40-6)

Finally, Alexander leaves us with the powerful images of a world boiling with words and waves that are swords. She suggests that words (which represent a cultural project) and swords (which represent activism and policy making) must go together for change to

³¹ Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, Profit* offers clear examples of such devastation.

transpire. In fact, “word” (w-o-r-d) is the base of the word “sword,” a poetic visual representation of this idea that words shape our actions.

In a personal essay, Alexander describes the significance of naming (through words/ swords) a river that symbolizes for her and brown women around the world a history of land theft and cultural genocide:

What would it be like to be a woman at the water’s edge, in such a ‘place of darkness,’ crying out at the white men who enter her world, changing it forever? How to understand the terror of a history that has torn away place names, shredding sense so that what she knew as her ordinary world has turned into someone else’s darkness? What would it be like for her granddaughter, fifty, seventy, a hundred years later to try to take back that tree, that river, that ancestry, and in such naming make the world over again? (“Accidental Markings” 131)

Through her poetry, Alexander reclaims from the French colonizers the indigenous name for the Mississippi River, *Misi-zibi*, or “Great Brown River.” In taking back a name, she also takes back an indigenous history and culture that was, in addition to the land and rivers, stolen by colonizers. She shows us that colonization and resistance to it are a shared experience for people from the Mississippi to Alexander’s own home-rivers, the Nile and the Ganges. Illustrating the power of words, “Great Brown River” revives a culture, a people, a river, and all the plants and animals that depend on that river for spiritual and physical sustenance.

I was once asked in a job interview if the study of literature must always be “political,” to which I responded that there is no such thing as a politically neutral way of studying literature. As long as we refuse to see in our literatures that the “missing word is white” (ie. as long as we wear those white goggles), racism will persist. As long as we don’t question how the places we know and love have been named, the stolen histories of our ancestors will remain buried in the ground. And as long as there is racism, the environment will be at risk. While engineers and scientists are working to solve the environmental crisis, detrimental environmental policies remain in place and the public feels helpless in the face of monumental, seemingly science-based problems. An antiracist ecocriticism holds that a shift in values toward empathy and antiracism can go a long way in redistributing natural resources, limiting pollution, and restoring balance in ecosystems. As T.V. Reed asserted in his essay on environmental justice ecocriticism in 2002, “The lack of a strong environmental justice component within the field of ecocriticism should be felt as a deep crisis, one that should be addressed seriously at all levels of the field, from conferences, to journals, to associations, to public statements, in published work, and in direct political action” (157). Although the incorporation of environmental justice and antiracism into the field of ecocriticism has been slow, the development of environmental humanities programs across the country, as well as the recently reinstated diversity caucus at ASLE, along with the ongoing efforts of underprivileged communities fighting for environmental justice in the U.S. and around the world, offer hope for a sustainable future for all.

CHAPTER TWO

From Desert Dust to City Soot: Environmental Justice and Japanese American Internment in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*

In this city, you have to risk your life; go farther, and pay more to be poor.
—Buzzworm, *Tropic of Orange*, 175³²

As environmental justice scholars such as Vandana Shiva and Robert Bullard have explained, people of color, the poor, and women suffer disproportionately from ecological crises,³³ a reality made dramatically evident by Karen Tei Yamashita in *Tropic of Orange* (1997), which charts the interrelated lives of seven racially marginalized characters as they navigate an oppressive urban landscape. Yamashita's intricate narrative draws an important environmental connection between seemingly incongruent social phenomena to reveal that environmental justice is not only a recent urban struggle, but also one that is rooted in the past with long-term physical and psychological effects. Julie Sze, in a pioneering essay that calls attention to the "emerging literature of environmental justice," offers an analysis of *Tropic of Orange* that illuminates this environmental connection between historical and contemporary issues of colonization and labor for women of color in its analysis of the characters Rafaela and Emi (7).³⁴

Here, I introduce yet another set of historical and contemporary issues that are foundational to an environmental justice reading of the novel: the past trauma of Japanese

³² These are the words of the character Buzzworm in Karen Tei Yamashita's novel, *Tropic of Orange*.

³³ See, for example, Robert Bullard's *Dumping in Dixie*, Richard Hofrichter's edited volume *Toxic Struggles*, and Vandana Shiva's *Soil Not Oil*.

³⁴ For valuable readings of *Tropic of Orange*, several of which address environmental justice aspects of the novel, although in different ways than I do, see Julie Sze (2000), Elizabeth Ammons (2010), Youngsuk Chae (2008), Ruth Hsu (2006), Sue-Im Lee (2007), and Caroline Rody (2009).

American internment and the present-day homelessness of sansei Manzanar Murakami, who is named for one of those internment camps. In addition, I argue that cross-generational effects of internment are revealed in the character of his granddaughter, Emi Sakai, who refuses to acknowledge the painful history she has inherited. While this internment history may seem peripheral to *Tropic of Orange*'s central plots, it is actually alluded to throughout the novel, most notably every time Manzanar's name appears on the page. Consequently, Japanese American incarceration haunts Yamashita's characters and readers throughout the book. Internment's history of land theft and displacement, severe degradation of living and working conditions, and long-term psychological trauma, I will show, constitute important environmental justice issues for Manzanar and Emi, issues which, in a Japanese American context, have been and continue to be largely ignored. Yet consideration of these issues for Japanese Americans is crucial not only for motivating positive environmental change, but also for emphasizing the ongoing need for inclusion of Japanese American perspectives in scholarship across a diverse range of issues.³⁵

In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita threads together the disparate histories and modern-day experiences of Japanese Americans through the themes of displacement and earth-based resistance in order to make clear that the battle against environmental degradation is one that demands a comprehensive, humanistic approach which recognizes the dangerous long-term effects of race-based environmental inequality. With its focus on

³⁵ There are many texts on Japanese American internment which could be read through an environmental lens. In this chapter, I cite as examples Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* and Garrett Hongo's poetry. Internment itself has yet to be analyzed in terms of environmental impact, with the exception of historian Connie Y. Chiang's recent article.

the significant intersection of environmental and social justice issues, Yamashita's novel presents injustice and resistance in their myriad forms as a "complexity of layers" (Yamashita 57), epitomizing what David Schlosberg calls "the new pluralism" of the environmental movement (4). This new pluralist approach maintains the interconnectedness of various environmental and social events. As Schlosberg stresses, "environmental justice struggles are not strictly environmental," but rather collective efforts which "challenge multiple lines of domination" (117). He elaborates:

This understanding of an environmentalism with diverse issues and an assertion of linkage calls for a broader movement—one that must necessarily forge a solidarity among a range of groups and movements. This type of networking across issues and groups is a key defining characteristic, and a crucial organizing strategy, of the growing environmental justice movement. (117)

Tropic of Orange lays bare this vast network of issues and groups, offering a vision for such a cohesive environmental movement. Specifically, Yamashita presents intricate layers of environmental devastation and environmental racism to expose internment and homelessness as integral twentieth-century environmental justice issues demanding our attention in the immediate global environmental crisis.³⁶

Tropic of Orange directly addresses the major global environmental concerns of our time—agricultural production and trade, eco-imperialism, migration, urban development and pollution, global warming—and draws out their connections in what

³⁶ For the term *environmental racism*, a foundational concept in environmental justice theory and activism, see Bullard, "Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement," p.17-9.

critics consider a magical realist finale: an illegally imported orange drags the Tropic of Cancer from Mazatlán to Los Angeles where the lives of the novel's seven main characters collide in "an apocalypse of race, class, and culture" and, I would add, of environment (back cover). Moreover, the point where reality ends and fantasy begins is made irrelevant by Yamashita's piercingly insightful narrative. Her examples are extreme, but they accurately capture the gravity of the current, real environmental crisis at the same time that they challenge the reader's false perceptions of prevailing concepts such as "model minority" and "climate change." Further, Yamashita's extreme examples are glimpses into the real devastation faced by people living in the margins, such as Manzanar, whose stories are often overlooked.

Mapping Homelessness: Manzanar's Long History of Land-based Displacement

Of the "Environmental Justice Principles" drawn up by the delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, Principle No. 5 "affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples," emphasizing the pluralism of the environmental justice movement as well as the important role the environment plays in upholding the autonomy of a cultural community. Principle No. 15 specifically addresses the physical displacement of targeted communities during military takeovers and corporate development: "Environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms."³⁷ In *Tropic of Orange*, Manzanar's past internment and present homelessness exemplify precisely such a history

³⁷ See "Principles of Environmental Justice."

of occupation, repression, and exploitation for Japanese Americans. Further, Manzanar's dispossession can be traced back to his birthplace in Owens Valley, California, where a long history of forced removal exists for poor whites and people of color.

With his "lion's head of white hair flailing this way and that," Manzanar stands on a freeway overpass in *Tropic of Orange*, conducting music only he can hear (35). As he filters and directs the distinct sounds of America's second largest city, he orchestrates a complex score of seemingly disparate elements: ancient foundations of transportation along with present-day automobile pollution, massive concrete rivers against the joyous laughter of two friends carpooling to work, the lost control of an oil truck on the highway versus the consumption of an imported orange by a child in the back seat of a car (55-7). As the text emphasizes: "On the surface, the complexity of layers should drown an ordinary person, but ordinary persons never bother to notice, never bother to notice the prehistoric grid of plant and fauna and human behavior, nor the historic grid of land usage and property, the great overlays of transport . . ." (57). Indeed, Manzanar is extraordinary, not only in his skill for parsing and reorganizing the sounds of a dense urban space, but also in his ability to comprehend the weight of history and of present day environmental disaster at once. Perhaps he is able to do so because a corresponding "complexity of layers" exists within Manzanar himself; he embodies multiple experiences and resists essentialist stereotypes despite his concrete racial location as *sansei*, a third generation Japanese American. For example, he is at once crazy and not crazy. Gabriel, who is involved with Manzanar's granddaughter Emi, describes him: "He had a clarity of mind and speech; no glitches that I could notice. But then, who am I to say? After all, he lived on the street; he conducted an orchestra no one could see and

music no one could hear” (111). And the rest of Manzanar’s biography is as uncertain as his sanity. He may or may not be an ex-surgeon. “Manzanar” may or may not be his “real” name. And he may or may not have been born at Manzanar: “He had created his name out of his birthplace, Manzanar Concentration Camp in the Owens Valley. He claimed he was born there during the war. That would have been over fifty years ago, and he looked to be well over fifty” (111). This blurring of identity does not suggest ambiguity, however. On the contrary, it grounds Manzanar’s identity in the material truths of historical injustice for Japanese Americans. Whether or not Manzanar was born in Manzanar Internment Camp, he nevertheless was born out of the injustices of that place’s history, which comprises nearly two centuries of displacement for three groups of people: the Paiute Indians (Numa) during the mid to late nineteenth century; poor white ranchers, farmers, and miners in the early twentieth century; and Japanese Americans during World War II.

The first of these groups, the Paiute Indians, had been living peaceably in Owens Valley for thousands of years when discovery of gold by white prospectors precipitated the Owens Valley Indian War, which lasted from 1861 to 1863 and resulted in over 200 Indian deaths, mostly women and children (Vaughan 1). On July 22, 1863, over 1,000 Paiute people were forcibly marched 200 miles south to a concentration camp at Fort Tejon.³⁸ A year later, nearly 600 Owens Valley indigenous people were again relocated to Tule River, located 50 miles southwest of present-day Manzanar National Historic Site, and eventually to other reservations in the region that continue to exist to this day

³⁸ According to Ewan, “Only 850 of the more than 1,000 who began the journey arrived at the San Sebastian [sic] Reservation. By January 1864, only 380 people from the Owens Valley remained at the reservation, ‘almost in a state of starvation’; most had either died or escaped and returned to their homeland” (106).

(Ewan 104-106). Genocide and displacement of indigenous peoples by white colonists in pursuit of natural resources is a grave environmental injustice that, since European contact, American Indians have been fighting and continuing to survive.³⁹ The theft of Native lands by whites for the purpose of extracting and profiting from natural resources, from 19th-century gold mining in Owens Valley to present-day uranium mining in New Mexico, has resulted in and continues to result in further environmental injustices, including those related to the uneven allocation of natural resources and the profits made by them, conservation struggles, toxic emissions, land erosion, and ground contamination, all of which disproportionately affect the health and well-being of people of color, poor whites, and all women and children living and working in mining regions.

The second displaced group were people descended from the white miners as well as from the white farmers and ranchers who had invaded Paiute land. By 1910, life for them had stabilized with the success of agricultural production and trade, and the town of Manzanar was established.⁴⁰ However, between 1905 and 1930 the city of Los Angeles deceitfully purchased and stole land and water rights from those white settlers for the construction of an aqueduct to carry water from Owens Valley to Los Angeles. With desertification added to the unjust acquisition of land, these white farmers and ranchers

³⁹ The preamble to the “Principles of Environmental Justice” introduces the building of a movement for “all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities . . . to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples.” See also Principle No. 11. For more on U.S. indigenous environmental justice struggles, see Barry Lopez (1990), Winona LaDuke (1999), and Jace Weaver (1996).

⁴⁰ For the early history of Owens Valley, see Jeffery F. Burton. See also Ewan.

were forced to relocate in order to survive.⁴¹ This intertwined social/environmental issue of community displacement and water resource depletion in the region, like the forced relocation of Paiute Indians, prefigures the environmental injustices suffered by Japanese Americans during World War II.

Being forced in rather than out, the 10,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated at Manzanar Relocation Center became the third displaced group in Owens Valley, nearly a decade following the final land dispute between white farmers and Los Angeles. As a Congressional report later acknowledged, Japanese Americans were torn from their homes on the West Coast and placed in concentration camps, some at Owens Valley and some as far east as Arkansas, due to “race prejudice, war hysteria, and failure of political leadership” (U.S. Commission 18). To justify its actions at the time, the United States government claimed that Japanese Americans were a threat to national security because they had ‘strategically’ settled on farmland located near “military bases, aircraft plants, airports, [and] highways” (Murray 43). In actual fact, Japanese American farms existed long before the development of these major thoroughfares and depots, and it was the growing success of these farms that was perceived as an economic and racial threat to many white farmers and residents in California. In 1940, 63% of Japanese Americans were employed in agriculture-related work, with farms owned or operated by Japanese Americans valued at a total of 72 million (U.S. Commission 122). Wresting these farms away from Japanese Americans was an explicit goal. Alice B. Murray quotes white farmer Frank Taylor of the Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association saying: “We’re charged with wanting to get rid of the Japs for selfish reasons. We might as well be

⁴¹ The Owens Valley “water wars” are documented in Marc Reisner, Chapter 2, and David Wyatt, Chapter 5.

honest. We do. It's a question of whether the white man lives on the Pacific Coast or the brown man. They came into this valley to work, and they stayed to take over . . . If all the Japs were removed tomorrow, we'd never miss them in two weeks, because the white farmers can take over and produce everything the Jap grows" (23).⁴² A clear example of environmental injustice, the U.S. government removed Japanese Americans from their thriving farms and communities and incarcerated them in an environmental wasteland bordered by tall, barbed-wire fences, in order, in part, to see more farmland allocated to whites.

Adding to the list of criminal tactics used to coerce Japanese Americans into incarceration is the U.S. government's touting of compliance as a patriotic act. On January 16, 1942, Californian U.S. Congressman Leland Ford stated:

If an American born Japanese, who is a citizen, is really patriotic and wishes to make his contribution to the safety and welfare of this country, right here is his opportunity to do so, namely that by permitting himself to be placed in a concentration camp, he would be making his sacrifice and he should be willing to do it if he is patriotic and is working for us. As against this sacrifice, millions of other native born citizens are willing to lay down their lives, which is a far greater sacrifice, of course, than being placed in a concentration camp. (qtd. in Murray 27)

This "justification" for internment clearly mocks and exploits Japanese American cultural values of humility and grace in the face of hardship, claiming it is a sign of dignity to be forcibly removed from one's home and placed behind barbed wires. The reality is that

⁴² See also "Economic Motives" at www.densho.org.

Japanese Americans endured by far the greatest sacrifice of any American group during World War II when the U.S. government compelled them simultaneously into military service and imprisonment. Alongside those “millions of other native born citizens,” more than 30,000 people of Japanese descent put their lives on the line for a country that deliberately robbed them of their homes, autonomy, and dignity (*National Archives*).

Internment also resulted in extreme land-based economic losses for Japanese Americans. Although few Japanese American farmers actually owned land (it was illegal for first-generation Japanese Americans to lease or own land until California’s Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 were ruled unconstitutional in 1952), incarcerated people did lose the farms that they operated to white landowners and agricultural corporations during the war.⁴³ Because their land was taken from them, and because hostility toward them upon return was too severe to continue living there, only 30% of internees returned to their farmland after internment (Manzanar Interpretive Center). Those Japanese American internees who returned to their homes and businesses in urban communities also suffered profound losses; in many cases, property and personal valuables had been vandalized or sold (U.S. Commission 117-32). Additionally, the War Relocation Authority’s post-war resettlement program discouraged Japanese Americans from returning to their homes, offering incentives for them to relocate to urban and suburban areas in the Midwest and on the East Coast.

⁴³ Coinciding with this shift of power back to white people in the agriculture business, the Bracero Program was born (a federal initiative that placed Mexican migrant workers on California farms from 1942 to 1964) and the Central Valley Project reinvigorated (a federal program that built reservoirs, canals, aqueducts, and pump plants to meet the demand for water), both of which unjustly placed the negative environmental and social costs of an exponentially growing industry on Mexican American laborers, Native American tribal communities and lands, and fragile ecosystems.

One of the few novels to focus entirely on Japanese American internment, Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2003) portrays the physical and psychological dislocation suffered by such Japanese American families. Tracing the experience of an Japanese American family from relocation to reintegration, the novel shows that, despite the family's exclamation that they are "free" after returning home from the internment camp, each member continues to live as though imprisoned: "Without thinking, we had sought out the room whose dimensions—long and narrow, with two windows on one end and a door at the other—most closely resembled those of the room in the barracks in the desert where we had lived during the war" (111-2).⁴⁴ The house the family returns to after the war has been vandalized—things stolen, and parts of the structure and property destroyed, but this represents only a small part of the change that the detainees face upon their return. The family itself is permanently altered through displacement: a cruel racism has been internalized and continues to affect their daily lives not only economically and politically, but also emotionally and psychologically.

Similarly, *Tropic of Orange*'s Manzanar Murakami experiences an emotional and psychological dislocation due to his history of physical removal and forced relocation. Even though Yamashita does not explain Manzanar's abandonment of life as a surgeon, it is clear that the trauma of internment is a catalyst. "One day, he left a resident to sew up a patient, removed his mask, gloves, and gown, strode through the maze of corridors, down the elevator, through patient waiting, to become a statistic under *missing persons*" (56). In Manzanar's case, to be a "missing person" is not simply to be *absent*, but to be, quite literally, *misplaced*. He physically removes himself from society to become homeless

⁴⁴ The spatial politics of internment are discussed by Abigail Manzella in the first chapter of her dissertation (10-51).

because that is how he feels: put out of place. Moreover, his loss of a physical place to live parallels the actual loss of homes and businesses faced by internees returning home after the war.

Although Manzanar lives off the grid, so to speak, he continues to navigate a vast urban network. He sets up camp along the arterial vein of Los Angeles, the city's well-known Harbor Freeway. In this way he positions himself as outsider and insider to a city that is both a hostile labyrinth and the place he calls home. "It was suggested that [Manzanar] could be taken by helicopter and left on a mountain top—certainly a grand enough vista for a hundred shamisen or a thousand cellos. But those who knew Manzanar knew that he would find his way back, track sounds back to the city, to the din of traffic and the commerce of dense humanity and the freeway" (37). Not only does this elucidate the role of conducting in establishing place for Manzanar—Manzanar's preferred orchestra for which to conduct is made up of the moving people and vehicles that are the heartbeat of Los Angeles—but the passage also parallels actual efforts in L.A. to remove homeless people from the city. In his well known study, Mike Davis describes this historical effort: "Although city leaders periodically essay schemes for removing indigents *en masse*—deporting them to a poor farm on the edge of the desert, confining them in camps in the mountains, or, memorably, interning them on a derelict ferry at the Harbor—such 'final solutions' have been blocked by council members fearful of the displacement of the homeless into their districts" (Davis 232). Davis points out that, instead, the city resolved to "contain"—and this is the official term—the homeless in the inner city, in such neighborhoods as Skid Row. But Manzanar refuses to live either

outside of the city or in designated inner-city containment sites like Skid Row. Rather, he claims the entire city as his own through the power of his conductor's baton.

Yet, much like the racially segregated internment camps located in the desert and the damaged urban homes to which urban internees returned, Manzanar's new residence, "an encampment hidden in freeway overgrowth," is an unjustly designated living space for the urban poor, who are overwhelmingly people of color. While Yamashita suggests that Manzanar is homeless by choice, she grounds the precariousness of his homeless status in the conviction of his newly chosen career as conductor of the Harbor Freeway. "To say that Manzanar Murakami was homeless was as absurd as the work he chose to do. No one was more at home in L.A. than this man" (36). Importantly, it is the act of conducting, and not homelessness itself, that Manzanar chooses and that allows him to maintain his autonomy in the face of a history of violent displacement. As conductor of L.A.'s transporting masses, he establishes a place for himself in an overwhelmingly large and oppressive city and thereby confronts present and past ostracism. By claiming the overpass as his conductor's platform and home, Manzanar rejects ideas of property and ownership within a corrupt system of real estate and housing foreclosures, a system which disproportionately targets people of color and poor whites, and which forces them, as the principles of environmental justice point out, to inhabit environments overburdened with pollution. "[A] figure of strange command outlined starkly between skyscrapers in the afternoon sunlight," he directs the cars that omit toxins into the air he breathes (35). He transposes the Harbor Freeway, a "writhing concrete dinosaur," into the "greatest orchestra on earth" (37). The act of conducting empowers Manzanar to live on his own terms within a physically, psychologically, and spiritually toxic environment—an

environment not unlike the place his name references. Manzanar's symphony finally reaches its climactic end when his baton directs traffic to a stand-still, momentarily ceasing the flow of car exhaust and converting cars to temporary homes and gardens for the homeless of the city, ultimately merging his beautifully transposed sounds of the city with beautiful acts of resistance.

Paradoxically, then, it is through homelessness—by becoming a “statistic under *missing persons*”—that Manzanar is able to position himself as a fully integrated and active resident (56). This paradox does not, however, designate homelessness as a “third” space of privileged mobility for the hybrid or de-centered subject.⁴⁵ Manzanar's homelessness is not a liberating circumstance; rather, it is manifest displacement born out of a long history of forced removal and land theft perpetrated against Japanese Americans and other racial minorities. Yamashita's novel demonstrates that through conducting, and not homelessness itself, Manzanar is able to claim rightful ownership to the city in which he was born and thus transform his dispossession, challenging and transcending the history of race-based dislocation in the U.S.

Health Hazards: From Coolies to Camps

I had never heard of the word diarrhea until I went to Manzanar.

—Mary Suzuki, Japanese American internee⁴⁶

In *Tropic of Orange*, Manzanar evokes a long past of hazardous living and working conditions, both of which are critical environmental justice issues. Due to

⁴⁵ This concept of “third space” identification is theorized of colonized peoples by critics such as Homi Bhabha. See his interview, “The Third Space,” p. 207-221.

⁴⁶ From the interview with Mary Suzuki in the Densho Digital Archive.

constant exposure to dangerously high concentrations of car exhaust, dust, and the general grime of one of the largest urban areas in the world, Manzanar is described as having a “blackened appearance like a chimney sweep” (110). Environmental Justice Principle No. 8 “affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment.” With a similar emphasis on health and safety for all people, regardless of culture or race, Principle No. 12 “affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provided [sic] fair access for all to the full range of resources.”⁴⁷ Manzanar’s home, a “‘modest place’ in an encampment hidden in freeway overgrowth,” and his workplace, a smog-saturated highway overpass, offer clear examples of these principles in violation.

Such inhumane living and working conditions also define the incarceration experience for Japanese Americans, although health-threatening, discriminatory housing and labor did not originate for them then. In 1868, when the first group of Japanese indentured laborers arrived in Hawaii to work on sugar plantations under government contract, atrocious working and living conditions drove the Meiji government to prohibit further emigration until the Hawaiian and Japanese governments adopted a new agreement about labor in 1885, following the Chinese Exclusion Act.⁴⁸ Over the next nine years, Hawaii and the United States recruited Japanese laborers to work on farms, railroads, and sugar plantations, and in mines and logging camps, under conditions that

⁴⁷ See “Principles of Environmental Justice.”

⁴⁸ The history of contract labor for “coolies” in North America also includes laborers from China, Korea, the Philippines, and South Asia. For more on the history of Asians in America, see Ronald Takaki (1989) and Wann Anderson with Robert G. Lee (2005).

were barely improved. These laborers began to fight for their right to fair wages, hours, and shelter, resulting in the lynching of Japanese immigrant Katsu Goto for his labor rights advocacy work in 1889 (Niiya 29-30). When contract labor was finally outlawed in 1900, more than 8,000 laborers participated in over 20 strikes in Hawaii and the mainland U.S. demanding their right to humane working conditions (Niiya 34). Despite ongoing economic and social oppression in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Japanese laborers in the U.S. continued to fight for their rights to fair working conditions and land ownership in a series of strikes and innovative strategies to acquire land.⁴⁹ Still, these immigrants worked for lower wages than whites, paid a higher price to lease the land,⁵⁰ and found the California oil boom crowding them out and polluting many of their farms.⁵¹

This often overlooked pre 1940s history of Japanese American contract workers and farmers reveals an extensive record of environmental injustice targeting people of Japanese descent leading up to the World War II incarceration, which, with its inhumane living and working conditions, violated the principles of environmental justice.⁵² Repeatedly told that they were being relocated “for their protection,” internees arriving at the camps were horrified to see barbed wire fence and military police in towers with guns

⁴⁹ By the early twentieth century many Japanese immigrant laborers found ways around the law to lease, and in some cases, own their own land, mainly through their American born children who could legally purchase land. Land ownership was not granted to Japanese Americans until 1956, four years after naturalization was permitted.

⁵⁰ For a discussion on this specific history of Japanese immigrant farmland see articles by Eiichiro Azuma and Robert Higgs.

⁵¹ While I have yet to find a report on the direct effect of oil rigs on Japanese American farmland, numerous studies have been done on the overall detrimental environmental impact of the oil rig boom on 1920s California, which undoubtedly affected Japanese American farmers. Dale Ann Sato’s *Japanese Americans of the South Bay* offers a visual record of oil derricks on Japanese American farmland.

⁵² Environmental Justice Principle No. 8. See p. 56 of this dissertation.

pointing at them. May K. Sasaki, incarcerated at Puyallup Assembly Center as a child, describes feeling like a “caged animal” on display for visiting white tourists who came to witness the spectacle of amassed “Japs” behind barbed wire.⁵³ Mary Suzuki Ichino also describes feeling treated like an animal when, on her first day at Manzanar, she was handed a sack to fill with hay. “We had to fill up our own mattress with hay. It’s kind of like going from a human being to an animal.” Many Japanese Americans were literally housed in animal stalls for up to six months in “assembly centers” at various fairgrounds along the West coast before being moved to more permanent incarceration camps.

Severe dust storms, inedible food, lack of privacy, and shortage of supplies defined the reality for detainees at Manzanar camp. As an incarcerated person at Poston, Arizona, states:

Our mouths are always gritty, and the rooms including the mess halls cannot be kept clean even by closing all the doors and windows because there are so many cracks in the walls and floors. From about 1:30 P.M. daily, the wind rises, and often we can’t see a half mile ahead due to the dust cloud. Each step we take we stir up dust. (qtd. in Murray 61)

Beyond its constant exposure to dust, food in the camps was inedible due to poor quality and lack of variety. Mary Nomura describes food at Manzanar: “. . . the first meal that I got that night was canned sauerkraut and canned wienies . . . it was worse than you can imagine, what they first fed us.” Additionally, she and many other internees name lack of privacy as one of the most difficult things they faced at camp: “We were just shocked to find that we had to take showers with everybody else that we didn't know. . . . The

⁵³ I accessed these interviews of former Japanese American internees at the Densho Digital Archive.

commodities had no partitions; we could hold hands with the person next to us. It was really primitive and very uncomfortable.” Another internee at Manzanar, Aiko Herzig, recalls that she was unable to get sanitary napkins for her menstrual period and explains that even toilet paper was hard to come by: “. . . there was also the fact of toilet tissues, that was a short supply [sic] or sometimes non-existent in the latrines. And I recall, we’re tearing up magazines and trying to soften them up by rubbing them together and using them.” When food caused an epidemic of diarrhea at Manzanar, the “fact of toilet tissues” became an even greater problem.

These severe conditions of the internment camp for which Yamashita’s Manzanar is named parallel the harmful environmental conditions of the homeless tent city and freeway overpass where the novel’s conductor lives and works. Manzanar’s Los Angeles, “the homeless capital of the U.S.,”⁵⁴ has a disproportionately high percentage of displaced racial minorities, with 50% of the homeless population African American even though African Americans make up only 9% of the entire city population.⁵⁵ These percentages show what a truly disproportionate burden people of color carry, and although Japanese Americans represent a small percentage of the homeless population in Los Angeles due, in part, to rapid integration of Japanese Americans after World War II, they have yet to achieve equality with whites.⁵⁶ In *Tropic of Orange*, Manzanar’s homelessness stands as both a gesture of solidarity with all people of color who suffer injustices and a challenge to the misleading stereotype of Japanese Americans as the

⁵⁴ Following a report in January 2006 that documented 88,345 homeless people living in Los Angeles County, Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa of Los Angeles stated before the media, “This is the capital of homelessness in America.” See Randal C. Archibold.

⁵⁵ From a 2004 report by the Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty at the Weingart Center.

⁵⁶ See Jere Takahashi, p. 158.

“model minority,” people supposedly immune to injustice resulting from the targeting of people of color for negative environmental impacts.⁵⁷

Cultivating Sites of Resistance

The watermelon that grew, that they grew, in Manzanar, it is so sweet. I can still taste that.

—Hikoji Takeuchi, Japanese American internee⁵⁸

One way in which communities of color have resisted and continue to resist everyday health hazards experienced in harsh environments such as the Japanese American internment camps and modern-day urban encampments for the homeless is by growing their own food. Nearly every issue of Manzanar Incarceration Center’s independent newspaper, *Manzanar Free Press*, mentions the gardens at the camp. With article titles like “Daisies Bloom, Radishes Sprout” and “Landscape Designs Unique Desert Garden,” the newspaper features personal and community gardens, with one article even boasting about the camp’s apple orchard as “a scenic apple blossom community of California,” pitching the town of Manzanar as a tourist destination for its natural beauty (“Apple”). But the value of these gardens exceeds mere spectacle. They play an important role in the Japanese American struggle for food justice within the camp.⁵⁹

In the middle of the desert, incarcerated people at Manzanar, in an act of resistance to their illegitimate and demoralizing imprisonment, grew crops by draining

⁵⁷ For more on the Japanese American model minority stereotype see George T. Endo and Connie Kubo Della-Piana’s article (47-8).

⁵⁸ From the interview with Hikoji Takeuchi in the Densho Digital Archive.

⁵⁹ See Robert Glottlieb and Anupama Joshi’s *Food Justice*.

off water from the Los Angeles aqueduct. In her memoir, *Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston⁶⁰ explains that “[g]ardens had sprung up everywhere, in the firebreaks, between the rows of barracks—rock gardens, vegetable gardens, cactus and flower gardens. . .” (99). Small miracles in the desert, the gardens at Manzanar symbolized community action against oppression, forecasting the strong emphasis on fair access to food and green space in the environmental justice movement today.⁶¹

Supporting a local and sustainable way of producing food without hurting others or the earth with exploitative labor and pesticides, Manzanar’s gardens paved the way for future community gardens in the United States, such as the South Central Farm of Los Angeles, which became the largest urban garden in the country for over ten years before being tragically confiscated and destroyed in 2006.⁶² Like the gardens at Manzanar, the South Central Farm provided nourishing fruits and vegetables, green space and natural beauty, cooperative spirit, and a meaningful connection to ancestors and the land for a low-income community.⁶³ As environmental justice thinkers from bell hooks to Winona LaDuke have explained, interaction with the land is not only a physical experience but also a spiritual one tied to history and survival,⁶⁴ a fact that Houston relates was crucial for her first generation émigré (*issei*) father at Manzanar:

⁶⁰ Co-written with her husband, James D. Houston.

⁶¹ The Interfaith Hunger Coalition’s landmark 1993 publication *Seeds of Change* broadly defines food security (also referred to as “food justice”) as the state of “all persons obtaining, at all times, a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local, non-emergency sources” (Ashman).

⁶² See Irazábal and Punja for a critical assessment of the farm as a “landscape of resistance” in the face of clear environmental justice violations.

⁶³ For more on the South Central Farm go to <http://www.southcentralfarmers.com>.

⁶⁴ See, especially, hooks’s “Touching the Earth” and LaDuke’s *All Our Relations*.

Whitney reminded Papa of Fujiyama. That is, it gave him the same kind of spiritual sustenance. The tremendous beauty of those peaks was inspirational, as so many natural forms are to the Japanese (the rocks outside our doorway would be those mountains in miniature). They also represented those forces in nature, those powerful and inevitable forces that cannot be resisted, reminding a man that sometimes he must simply endure that which cannot be changed. (98)

In likening the invincible forces of nature to the seemingly insurmountable force of incarceration, Houston says that these forces “cannot be resisted” and suggests that the fact of incarceration “cannot be changed,” and yet she shows us clear acts of resistance in her descriptions of community-developed gardens and the spirit of a people consistently sustained by natural beauty.

Like Houston, Manzanar Murakami in *Tropic of Orange* remembers the unique landscape at Manzanar Relocation Center: “For a moment, he saw his childhood in the desert between Lone Pine and Independence, the stubble of Manzanita and the snow-covered Sierras against azure skies” (170). While the gardens at Manzanar Incarceration Center are not explicitly mentioned here, the physical landscape in Manzanar’s memory is vivid and obviously laden with spiritual, political, and ecological meanings. For one, Manzanar’s recollection of *Lone Pine* and *Independence* emphasizes his past and present position straddling alienation and the freedom to self-rule. Moreover, the cultivated land itself is encoded in his name, which in Spanish means “apple orchard,” and the “stubble” of Manzanita shrubs, or “little apple” trees, symbolizes a small version of himself struggling to grow in the harsh climate of the internment camp. Finally, just as Mount

Whitney provided spiritual sustenance to Houston's father in the face of intolerable living conditions, the parched climate of Manzanar's Owens Valley is tempered by the striking beauty and visual physical relief of cool, snow-dusted mountains and boundless expanse of blue sky.

Manzanar's vision for freedom from racially motivated environmental injustice is not only sparked by his memory of the Sierras's natural splendor, but also manifests itself in the urban landscape of Los Angeles, which appears as a large-scale garden in which Manzanar Murakami conducts his music of protest. "They had attempted time after time to remove him from his overpass, from his eccentric activities, to no avail. They had even tried to placate him with a small lacquer bridge in the Japanese gardens in Little Tokyo. But Manzanar was destined for greater vistas" (37). While the Japanese gardens of Los Angeles' Little Tokyo signify generations of Japanese American community building and resistance, Manzanar orchestrates an even larger community and an even larger resistance movement. Above the grid of moving cars and people, he reinterprets for us the problems of racism and environmental injustice as cross-cultural and wide-ranging, a perspective that is necessary for change.

Indeed, gardens and agriculture throughout *Tropic of Orange* emphasize the multicultural and interdependent aspects of the environmental crisis facing people of color across borders. The novel's focal point, an orange that travels north from Mexico to L.A., dragging with it the Tropic of Cancer, is presented by Yamashita as both figuratively and literally embodying the intersection of environmental justice issues caused by industrial agricultural production and inequitable trade agreements, human organ trafficking, climate change, urban pollution, and the racial targeting of

immigrants.⁶⁵ Rafaela, a Mexican woman who, with her son, Sol, tends the garden at Gabriel's Mazatlán home, nurtures the tree that produces the anomalous orange long before the other trees have begun to blossom: "The tree was a sorry one, and so was the orange. Rafaela knew it was an orange that should not have been" (11). Despite strange weather patterns and the fact that Gabriel's trees were non-native to Mexico, Rafaela hopes to "make some miracle happen in this orchard" (11-12). One of only two women in the novel, Rafaela facilitates the journey of the orange and the sun north to L.A., which culminates in a cataclysmic "gesture of war" against anti-immigration policies, NAFTA, the infant organ black market, homelessness, and environmentally irresponsible corporations.⁶⁶ In Rafaela's garden, the seeds of protest germinate.

This theme of gardens as sites of struggle against environmental injustice continues in Yamashita's description of Buzzworm, Gabriel's double and streetwise informant, who attempts to locate his home on a map of Los Angeles gang territories from the book, "*Quartz City* or some such title" (81). This clear reference to Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* evokes the layers omitted from the government map—layers that would help Buzzworm to "get the real picture" (81). He thinks of the house he owns, for which he faithfully made payments after his grandmother died, a house that took "her lifetime and some of his" to pay off (81). "The house itself couldn't be worth nothing," he reflects, but then as he looks at the map encoded with land disputes, he sees that his house stands resolute against a history of displacement of poor and minority peoples whose land is claimed by the government for development. Buzzworm asks, "Was it the

⁶⁵ For a good discussion of the detrimental effects of industrial agriculture and global trade agreements such as NAFTA, see Kimbrall.

⁶⁶ In an environmental justice reading of *Tropic of Orange* that focuses on global labor and women, Julie Sze describes Rafaela as a "burgeoning activist."

land [that gave his house value]? The garden?" (81). Ultimately, he realizes that what gives his home value is not its price in real estate but what the house stands for: a refusal to be displaced, a refusal in which the garden, importantly, takes part as a site of resistance.

At the novel's apocalyptic ending, when the Harbor Freeway becomes a war zone, homeless people of a nearby tent city take over an abandoned Cadillac for the purpose of growing an urban garden in its hood. They also take over the local news reporting, which features an interview by Mara Sadat on Slim City's bold gardening project. Slim explains how it all began:

"Well since this babe wasn't goin' nowhere, we pulled her guts out and filled her yey high with some good old-fashioned dirt." . . . "And, now we got a garden goin'. Something we always wanted. Got lettuce in this corner, some baby carrots over here, tomatoes here. A patch like this'll do some good feedin'. Folks in the Fast Lane a little distant from the right shoulder where the plantin's easy." (191)

A garden growing in the hood of a disabled Cadillac—the now defunct most expensive U.S. vehicle—represents the quintessential urban garden. This communal project (Slim says "we got a garden goin'" and not "I got a garden goin'") not only provides food for those who are hungry and undernourished, but also feeds the spirit of a struggling people and transforms urban waste into food and art, simultaneously. The car provides shelter, shared community space, an environment for growing food, and a focal point of natural beauty. Supplying spiritual and physical nourishment, *Tropic of Orange's* unlikely

gardens recall Manzanar Internment Camp and participate in the present struggle for environmental justice at one and the same time.

Environmental Justice and Future Generations

haha ga ima yu-koto
sono uchi ni
wakatte kuru.

What your mother tells you now
in time
you will come to know.

—Mitsuye Yamada, from “What Your Mother Tells You”⁶⁷

In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita forces us to confront Manzanar’s history of internment as a complex, land-based history by encoding that history of his name, and she also reveals how that history affects a future generation. Both Manzanar and his granddaughter, Emi, assert their Japanese American identities by negotiating physical space and challenging mainstream society, but they do so in distinct ways that reflect their specific racial, gender, and generational locations. Emi represents a generation of young, ultramodern people whose myopic vision inhibits the possibility for action against a web of past and present environmental injustices. Unlike Manzanar, who fully takes in L.A.’s “complexity of layers,” Emi combats injustices as though they are disassociated from one another and the past, failing to see the vast network of social and environmental issues that comprises her history.

Despite her acute awareness of gender and racial stereotypes, displayed in part by her constant use of them with hyperbole, Emi refuses to acknowledge the painful history

⁶⁷ Yamada is a nissei, or second generation, Japanese American poet whose writing explicitly addresses World War II internment.

of racial and gender violence from which these stereotypes originated. Emi, who is described by Yamashita as “riding the crest of a wave, staying current with it” (22), defiantly stands against all things past—from her work with *News Now* to her exclusive appreciation of color film to her obsessive use of modern personal technological devices (22-3). Most prominently, she refuses to acknowledge Manzanar as her grandfather because he represents to her a complicated history of Japanese American discrimination and male privilege. When, over instant message, Gabriel encourages Emi to finish an interview she began with her grandfather, she refuses:

I'm like you, she had typed. Strictly noir.

But he's your grandfather.

So I'm in denial, okay?

He's probably not going to recognize you. What did your folks say?

Said they didn't want him institutionalized. That he's not crazy-crazy, see?

Just stubborn.

What else?

They don't want to talk about it. They want their privacy. Hey, all these years, they kept it from me. Me! If you know what's good for you, you'll leave my family out of this. (222)

Emi's blood relation to Manzanar, in fact, literalizes the direct tie she has to the unjust history of internment, a history she would rather not discuss even though she is eager to talk about almost every other political topic.⁶⁸ This denial, while specific to the trauma of

⁶⁸ In her research on the cross-generational impact of internment, Donna K. Nagata finds that the children of internees keep relatively quiet about internment out of shame, humility, and respect for their parents' silence. She writes, “Time has not severed the

internment for Japanese Americans, is also an emotional and psychological reflex that supports, for Emi, a limited environmental consciousness that lacks appreciation for the historical interconnections between race and environment.

In the novel's two restaurant scenes, Yamashita seamlessly blends a discussion of Emi's silenced family history, the harmful effects of the avaricious global fishing industry, the historical inaccuracies and discreet revelations in old black-and-white movies, and the unrivaled abilities of pre- and post-war Japanese American gardeners and farmers. In the first scene, Emi conflates the "passé" menu item *pappardelli con funghi al vino marsala* with the trendy Japanese delicacy *fugu*.⁶⁹ Here, Yamashita hints at the larger immediate societal and environmental hazards of such "poisonous" foods, and ultimately presents the outmoded *funghi* as an environmentally safe option to the fashionable but deadly *fugu*, even though Emi fails to draw a distinction between the two. In the next, complementary scene in a sushi restaurant, Yamashita implicitly draws attention to the environmentally devastating fishing industry that is driven by a growing global sushi market. Even as Emi criticizes a white woman at the sushi bar for commodifying traditional Japanese food, Emi herself is content to consume the elite and unsustainable food, an example of how she simultaneously denies her family's internment history—a history that involves the struggle for food justice—and the ecological harm caused by large-scale commercial fishing. In both scenes, Yamashita refers to the food as "to die for," a foreshadowing of Emi's literal death at the end of the

psychological ties to events that preceded them, nor has the fact that their parents will not openly discuss the internment" (ix). Emi, though she is *yonse*i, or fourth generation Japanese American rather than *sanse*i, clearly fits the same pattern Nagata describes.

⁶⁹ *Fugu* is a Japanese poisonous fish that must be prepared with precision for safe consumption.

novel, the price she pays for her denial of a environmentally-rooted past which, for her and the young generation of future-focused people which she represents, imperceptibly threatens the present (22, 124).

Yamashita does not, however, present Emi as completely oblivious to the important connection between past and present environmental injustices. At one point Emi comments on the “weirdness” of her work’s so-called Disaster Movie Week, which presents films focusing on “[t]he lives of ordinary people with petty problems who now have a big problem” (25). She lists the films, “Tonight it’s *Inferno in the Tower*. Tomorrow *The Northridge Quake*. Then it’s *Canyon Fires*. *Airport III*. *Bomb Threat at the Pacific Exchange*. *Burn Baby Burn*. And for the final insult, *The Day After*” (25), all of which explicitly reference specific fictional or factual events from the late twentieth century that raise questions about ethics and equity in environmental planning and policy. Shortly thereafter Emi finds herself caught in the rain (25), a seemingly “petty” problem that in fact signals “a big problem” for her since she, despite staying “on top of the news,” had not been able to predict this sudden change in the weather. This moment foreshadows the even “bigger” consequence she will face eventually for refusing to acknowledge the environmental justice story of her past—the drastic change in climate, metaphorically and literally, for Japanese Americans forced into internment during World War II. And later in the story, when Emi is called to report on a car crash on the Harbor Freeway, she snidely remarks to Gabriel: “[It was a] [r]ed convertible Porsche. Imagine, no L.A. native would buy such a thing. What are the chances? Breathe freeway air and get cancer. Lose your hair. Get jacked easy. Or just get shot straight on” (58). By listing together death by contaminated freeway air and death by gunshot so that they are

transposable, and suggesting that only a non-native person, or immigrant, would be vulnerable to such violence, Emi consciously or subconsciously discloses how urban pollution and urban violence can be interrelated environmental justice issues.

Although the injustices Emi faces on a daily basis as an Asian American woman are not depicted by Yamashita as explicitly environmental, they contribute to her attitude towards the environment, as well as to her death in a war sparked by multiple, interrelated environmental injustices. Additionally, as Sze argues in her article on gender and environmental justice in *Tropic of Orange*, the environmental justice backdrop to Emi's active participation in a consumer culture is the story of Asian women globally who are exploited for their labor in the production of unsustainable products (Sze 33). In the novel, Emi acknowledges this injustice when she says, "If you are making a product that you can actually touch . . . you are either an Asian or a machine" (24). Empirical data have shown time and time again that women of color carry the greatest burden in an increasingly globalized, technology driven, capitalistic world that cannot sustain itself.⁷⁰

Out of *Tropic of Orange's* diverse cast of seven main characters, Emi—the only other female character besides Rafaela—is the only one to die. Rafaela, who is of indigenous and Spanish descent, is the sole character in the story to be beaten and raped.⁷¹ The unjust fates of these two characters exemplify the fact that women of color suffer disproportionately from environmental devastation. Their painful experiences are depicted by Yamashita in sharp contrast to Manzanar's redemption at the end of the

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Devon G. Peña; also, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism*, especially chapter 5.

⁷¹ Colonization and globalization are both environmental issues that disproportionately affect indigenous women and women of color through sexual violence (see Smith), unfair labor practices (see Sze), reproductive technologies (see Mies and Shiva, Ch.12), and environmental hazards to which women are most susceptible (see Mies and Shiva).

novel. As Yvette Malamud Ozer rightly points out, Manzanar finally reconciles himself to his past when he stops conducting and reunites with his dying granddaughter at the end of the novel. “Manzanar let his arms drop. . . . [He] had followed an ancient tortoise out into a deep place in his brain and stayed there year after year. Now it seemed he had surfaced. . . . [he] climb[ed] onto the gurney with his granddaughter. . . . He took her hand in his like old times” (254-5). Despite having faced greater environmental risk than Emi through his experiences of incarceration and homelessness, Manzanar survives his granddaughter. Accurately playing out the reality of those gender-based inequities against which Emi struggles daily, Manzanar’s gender may be his saving grace. Emi’s departing words are “Abort. Retry. Ignore. Fail . . .” (252), a subtle gender reference and, even more important, a willful allusion to her earlier comparison of Asians to machines (23). Even as she is dying, Emi is able to retain a sharp wit in pretending to be a robot, but behind her humorous words rests the extent of her loss. At the end of a valiant battle against a white materialistic and patriarchal social order, Emi loses not only her life, but also her humanness.

Like Manzanar, Emi’s name holds significance. Her last name is Sakai, which means “border” or “boundary,” a geographical term fraught with social and political significance in its demarcation of land that holds economic, cultural, and spiritual meaning. While Emi is doing her best to resist racial and gender oppression, her struggle requires a seemingly impossible negotiation across a generational boundary that simultaneously protects and alienates her. What is more, she does not realize that the contemporary environmental issues that come up in her daily life are in one way or another bound to her identity and family history.

Reclaiming History

As a young person in L.A.'s public schools, Japanese American poet Garret Hongo never encountered the history of Japanese American internment in his textbooks. "I didn't understand that as a Japanese American I was experiencing a social and historical sadness," he says. "I wanted the words I was reading to belong to me, but there were no words for me, no words for my grandfather, no words for my grandmother" (Interview). And so he began writing poetry to recover that lost history, a history connected to his identity.

Through this poetry, Hongo claims the words for himself and his ancestors, weaving stories of a collective past and present that is rooted in the land:

I'm only a gardener
who before the War
was a dirt farmer and learned
how to grow the bamboo
in ditches next to the fields,
how to leave things alone
and let the silt build up
until it was deep enough to stink
bad as night soil, bad
as the long, witch-grey
hair of a ghost.

("Something Whispered" lines 6-16)

Hongo writes about an American historical imperative to “leave things alone,” and in doing so he actively refuses to do just that, *leave things alone*. Instead, he exposes the stinking ghost of Japanese American history, a history that includes the colonization of the Hawaiian Islands in 1778, resulting in genocide and ecocide which continues to this day; the importation of laborers from China, Japan, and the Philippines to work on sugar cane plantations under inhumane conditions; the irreparable environmental harm caused by the development of the sugar cane industry for a global market;⁷² the banning of indigenous Hawaiian and Asian languages; the forced conversion of Native Hawaiians by Christian missionaries; the detainment of immigrants on Angel Island; the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II; the colonial monopolization of a tourist economy in Hawaii; the privatization of land that strips native and Asian-Hawaiians of their rights to material (re)sources and spiritual practice.

Like Hongo, Yamashita grounds her story in historical truths for Japanese Americans. By invoking Japanese American incarceration as one of many haunting backdrops to her story, she calls upon the reader to imagine the social and ecological impacts of such an event on the current environmental crisis faced by all seven of characters in the novel, but most notably by Manzanar, explicitly named for one of the famous camps, and Emi, who has inherited from him the intertwined history of racial discrimination and environmental degradation. Whether through Hongo’s image of festering night soil or Yamashita’s image of an ancient tortoise lodged deep in

⁷² This large-scale industry has significantly impacted the health and wellbeing of the people and non-human inhabitants of Hawaii, including through the annihilation of entire ecosystems, deforestation, pollution, and water resource depletion. See, for example, Chapter Two of Tucker’s *Insatiable Appetite*.

Manzanar's brain, these two writers engage the environmental imagination as they work to reclaim the unique and important history of World War II incarceration.⁷³

In addition to presenting Manzanar and Emi as two outstanding examples of Japanese Americans who struggle against environmental injustices across gender and generational differences, *Tropic of Orange* predicts what scholar Jere Takahashi calls a “new racial project” for future generations of Japanese Americans, one that is “simultaneously ethnic specific, pan-Asian, and multiracial” (212). This pan-Asian, multiracial approach to environmental justice problems is illustrated in the stories of Bobby Ngu in *Tropic of Orange*, who is “Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown” (15), and his son, Sol, who was born in the U.S. and is of mixed race and culture, Chinese-Singaporean and Mexican. Bobby's story exemplifies the painful realities of the Southeast Asian immigrant experience in America, and even relates it to that of his Korean neighbor Celia Oh, who works around the clock in a low-wage garment factory. Meanwhile, two-year-old Sol lives with his mother, Rafaela, in Mazatlán, from which they are running north to escape child-organ traffickers. Sol takes with him the aberrant orange which, by dragging with it the Tropic of Cancer, precipitates and unites the novel's various environmental justice events, including the urban garden, the evocation of Manzanar, the uprising of homeless people of color, and the border-crossing of illegal immigrants. Ultimately, it is Sol and his orange that set Manzanar's final symphony into motion, triggering the cataclysmic

⁷³ See Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, for more on the concept of “environmental imagination.”

eruption of redemptive violence on the Harbor Freeway at the cost of Emi's life. By intertwining the lives of Bobby, Sol, Manzanar, and Emi, Yamashita makes clear that environmental justice for one individual or group is dependent on environmental justice for all.

Tropic of Orange's map of interrelated social and environmental issues for people of color, and especially—through the characters Manzanar and Emi—for Japanese Americans, epitomizes Takahashi's "new racial project" as it presents and demands concurrent and connected approaches to fighting injustices. In revealing the profound interconnectedness of World War II internment and modern environmental justices, Yamashita illustrates the importance of apprehending the intersection of past and present land-based social issues if the fight for progressive change is to be successful.

CHAPTER THREE

Streams of Violence: Colonialism, Modernization, and Gender in María Cristina Mena's Short Fiction

In the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, many prominent intellectuals and public figures such as Annie Gell, Apuvra Sanghi, and Paul Farmer have written about the event as an “unnatural” or “man-made” disaster. They explain that in addition to plate tectonics, various human factors produced Haiti’s disaster, including global warming, poor city planning, defectively constructed buildings and homes, a failed public health system, delayed and discriminatory government response, and deeply entrenched race, class, and gender divisions. As Noël Sturgeon argues, “conceiving of nature and culture as radically separate spheres . . . and promoting individualistic solutions to environmental problems without considering the need for change does not get at the root of our problems” (8). Sturgeon’s analysis, especially her refusal to separate nature and culture as unconnected entities, demands critical reflection on human-centered and human-augmented environmental disasters that expose deep-seated social values and ideologies about gender, race, and environment, a demand for the kind of reflection which, I argue in this dissertation, is often the work of literature.

Paralleling the experience in Haiti, María Cristina Mena’s short story, “John of God, the Water-Carrier,”⁷⁴ begins with an earthquake—a “natural” event—but proceeds to reveal the *unnatural* devastation caused by long-standing environmental injustices that target the poor and people of color. “John of God” and other stories by Mena show how colonialism, modernization, racism, and sexism interlink and directly tie to the

⁷⁴ Henceforth referred to as “John of God.”

environment. Specifically, Mena draws an important connection between sexual violence and the water crisis in Mexico City as a result of Spanish conquest and U.S. neocolonialism. These intertwined issues in her stories reveal that indigenous Mexican women⁷⁵ carry an environmental burden disproportionate to that of their male counterparts, a point that is further articulated in their relegation to invisible spaces in the text.

The Challenge to Ecofeminism

Indigenous women around the world are statistically the most disadvantaged group when it comes to environmental issues and so it is no surprise that they experience disproportionately high exposure to toxins and other hazards at home and at work.⁷⁶ The pursuit of social justice and an ecologically sustainable future, therefore, demands that attention be paid to them. Acknowledgment of indigenous women's presence and struggles reveals underlying systemic problems that affect us all, as leading ecofeminist critics including Karen Warren, Ariel Salleh, and Greta Gaard point out. According to Salleh, "Feminine suffering is universal because wrong done to women and its ongoing denial fuel the psychosexual abuse of all Others—races, children, animals, plants, rocks, water, and air. Ecofeminists make no particular claim for themselves, but a claim in general" (14). Ecofeminism viewed in this light provides an essential critical framework

⁷⁵ The indigenous population in Mexico is Indian and mestizo. I will interchangeably refer to this population as indigenous, Indian, and Indian Mexican. See Gloria Anzaldúa, 26-7, for a succinct history of the effects of Spanish conquest on indigenous populations in Mexico.

⁷⁶ For data that support this claim, see, for example, Shiva and Mies's *Ecofeminism* and Karen Warren's essay.

for revealing the interconnectedness of various social and environmental issues that may not, upon first glance, seem related.

Yet ecofeminism, which began as a white woman's movement, often privileges gender issues over race issues,⁷⁷ a situation that must change. Moreover, if the larger movement/field of ecofeminism is to be successful, it must—like environmental justice—prioritize immediate action over theory to combat current, real-life atrocities.⁷⁸ David Schlosberg's "new pluralist" environmental justice approach maintains the interconnectedness of various environmental and social events, emphasizing that "environmental justice struggles are not strictly environmental," but rather collective efforts which "challenge multiple lines of domination" (117). However, while together ecofeminism and environmental justice can effectively address both race and gender issues, neither framework specifically tackles the issue of colonialism, which is arguably *the* central ecological and social problem for indigenous women around the globe. The joining of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory in recent literary studies does attempt to illuminate the parallels among the destructive forces of colonialism on humans, animals, and the natural environment. Yet, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin point out, ". . . the two fields are notoriously difficult to define, not least by practitioners and they are not necessarily united even in their most basic interpretative methods or fundamental ideological concerns" (2). Huggan and Tiffin go on to assert that despite postcolonial theory's anthropocentric application, it is, in fact, a field that demands as much attention to the non-human as to the human, a perspective that is extremely important to a reading

⁷⁷ See Dorceta E. Taylor's "Women of Color" and Ariel Salleh (1997) for such discussions on race and ecofeminism.

⁷⁸ See Taylor as well as Andy Smith's "Ecofeminism through an Anticolonial Framework."

of Mena's short fiction. For example, in Mena's "John of God," water issues—simultaneously affecting the earth and humans—bridge postcolonial and ecocritical concerns.

Analysis of Mena's stories must consider genocide, deculturation, and ecocide as intertwined outcomes of Spanish conquest and colonialism which indigenous women in Mexico have survived and continue to fight for their long-term survival. Because the population in Mexico had become predominately mestizo (mixed Spanish and Indian descent) by the nineteenth century, due to a long history of rape of indigenous women by Spaniards and also of intermarriage between the two races, the process of decolonization for indigenous Mexicans was unusually complicated. The surviving indigenous communities became increasingly marginalized, and dark-skinned mestizos joined Native people as part of the peasant classes who eventually revolted against discriminatory land laws during the *Porfiriato*.⁷⁹ The *Porfiriato* also introduced a new era of rapid economic development in Mexico, largely fueled by foreign investment and thus marking the beginning of neocolonialism by the U.S., the same country that had stolen a large portion of Northern Mexico through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo only fifty years earlier.⁸⁰ With careful consideration of the expanding field of ecofeminism along with the history of colonialism in Mexico, this chapter presents an *anticolonial feminist environmental*

⁷⁹ The *Porfiriato* is the time period of Porfirio Díaz's second presidency in Mexico, from 1884 to 1910.

⁸⁰ The U.S. and other foreign powers invested capital in economic development in Mexico during the *Porfiriato*. "U.S investment amounted to more than \$2 billion, more than all the capital in the hands of Mexicans" (qtd in Acuna 126). As a result, U.S.-led multinational corporations had a stake in Mexico's water and its distribution.

*justice analysis*⁸¹ which deliberately places *anticolonial*, *feminist* and *environmental justice* in fluid conversation with one another, maintaining an openness to new interpretive and activist claims for indigenous women at their intersections and fissures. Only in this way can ecofeminism and environmental justice be perceived as intertwined yet autonomous concepts, with equal importance, power, and agency, so that one movement is not co-opted by the other.

As a theoretical framework applied within environmental and ecocritical studies, ecofeminism appears to position gender inequality as an *alternative* (albeit important) point of consideration for cultural and textual analyses rather than as an institutionalized hegemonic force that fundamentally shapes both fields of study. On the other hand, feminist ecocriticism actively challenges the claim of a politically neutral stance for ecocriticism, arguing that an ecocriticism that is not feminist is actually coded as patriarchal. Likewise, an antiracist, anticolonial ecocriticism calls attention to the various subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which a white, colonizing perspective is very often privileged in ecocritical studies. The shift to focusing on indigenous women which I propose here demands that we as critics assert a feminist and antiracist position by always taking into consideration the entwined politics of gender and race, recognizing that these issues and our reading of them carry significant impact in the material world. As Serpil Oppermann explains in her forthcoming essay, “Feminist Ecocriticism: A Posthumanist Direction in Ecocritical Trajectory,” “Exploring how the ecocritical readings of specific literary texts where the reality of women’s bodies, as well as the lived experience of all gendered bodies in the natural world are inscribed, would deepen our understanding of

⁸¹ This is an alternative to Noël Sturgeon’s *global feminist environmental justice analysis*.

how literature intersects with life itself.” A feminist ecocriticism that maintains awareness of the lived experiences of indigenous women around the globe reveals that literature does not merely represent life, but in fact *breathes* life, providing moments of valuable insight into tangible, everyday environmental injustices and into our capacity to respond with compassion and confidence.

Indigenous Women and the Literary Imagination

Early in the twentieth century in the U.S. when extreme race-hatred against Mexican Americans had escalated due to fear of insurgence in the border states, Mena, a Mexican expatriate living in New York City, wrote stories about her people and her homeland which were published in popular magazines for a white audience.⁸² Mena’s stories paint a vivid picture of the infiltration into Mexico of white tourists, goods, industry, and values as a result of U.S. imperialism during Porfirio Diaz’s regime and offer examples of how native Mexican people adapt to environmental, social, and economic changes in subversive ways.

Scholarship on Mena’s work highlights the ways in which she complicates the role of women in Mexico at the time she wrote, especially in relation to imperialism, and emphasizes the fact that, despite extreme female subordination in Mexico, Mena gives her women characters agency.⁸³ However, the acknowledgment by critics of women’s oppression and activism in her stories concentrates only on those stories in which the

⁸² Her stories were published in the 1910s and 1920s in magazines like *Century Magazine* and *American Magazine* and were collected in a single volume edited by Amy Doherty in 1997. Not only does Mena’s writing provide a perfect example of “local color” fiction, Doherty suggests, but it also speaks directly to political and social issues of the time.

⁸³ For such feminist analyses of Mena’s work, see, for example, Kyla Schuller, Begoña Simal, Elizabeth Ammons, Tiffany Ana López, and Amy Doherty.

protagonist is female. When the lead character is male, the female characters seem either to take on roles in support of him or to disappear completely.⁸⁴ Vicki Ruiz explains this phenomenon as it occurs in Mexican American historical scholarship: “Scholarly publications on Mexican American history have usually relegated women to landscape roles. The reader has a vague awareness of the presence of women, but only as scenery, not as actors or wage earners, and even their celebrated maternal roles are sketched in muted shades” (xiv). Ruiz’s invocation of “landscape” here is not incidental; the rendering of environment and of women in general as marginal or invisible players in a story is, unfortunately, common practice within criticism. However, this misrepresentation of the role that environment and women of color play in colonial narratives can be corrected by reimagining the presence of these female characters as ecological and social agents who actively shape history and text.⁸⁵ In Mena’s “John of God,” for example, Dolores is frequently portrayed as simply playing the part of adopted daughter/fiancé/caretaker to the protagonist Juan de Dios and his brother Tiburcio. Yet Dolores’s own struggle and resistance exist; and her presence within the narrative calls attention to important environmental issues for indigenous women in Mexico City and its surrounding pueblos at the turn of the last century. The presence of indigenous women in such Mexican Indian and Mestizo/a texts, especially, calls for a reimagining of ecological problems that places these women and the environment first.

⁸⁴ Margaret Toth, for example, analyzes the physical impact of imperialism on the bodies (through labor) of the two central male characters in “John of God, the Water-Carrier.”

⁸⁵ According to Kate Shanley, “Native peoples are a permanent ‘present absence’ in the U.S. colonial imagination, an ‘absence’ that reinforces at every turn the conviction that Native peoples are indeed vanishing and that the conquest of Native lands is justified” (qtd. in Ruiz 9).

The opening scene of “John of God” depicts the young protagonist Juan de Dios rising from the ground in the aftermath of an earthquake. “Through the ground had passed a series of shudders, like those of a dying animal, with a twitching of houses, a spilling of fountains, and a quick sickness to people’s brains” (12). Mena offers a visual record of the devastation caused by the earthquake through images of non-human creatures, human-made structures, and people. Since fountains in early twentieth-century Mexico City served as both a gathering place and a site for working-class families and hired *aguadors*⁸⁶ to collect drinking water, this image of violently surging fountains represents a threat to the social fabric and physical survival of a community. Moreover, the analogy to death here—through the description of twitching houses and deteriorating mental states—extends metaphorically to include the destruction of culturally established architectural forms and ways of thinking, thus implicitly tying the natural disaster to the assault on indigenous tradition taking place at the time through U.S. neocolonialism. While earthquakes are often looked at in terms of environmental impact on humans and not the other way around, colonialism is often viewed as a human problem, not an ecological one. By blurring the line between natural and man-made disaster, Mena invites the reader to consider how the disastrous effect of the earthquake is rooted not only in “nature” but also in the hegemonic social structures of society as a result of colonial rule.

It is clear from the outset of Mena’s story that it is Mexican Indian men like the protagonist Juan de Dios who suffer the brunt of natural disasters, just as they suffer the brunt of negative environmental impacts caused by colonialism and imperialism. Indeed, the opening scene of “John of God” foreshadows Juan de Dios’s eventual trials with the

⁸⁶ An *aguador* is a water-carrier.

modernization of water systems in Mexico. But what goes hardly noticed is the subplot in which the earthquake sparks a chain of events that results in the death of an Indian woman and subsequent orphaning of her young daughter. After the ground stops shaking, Juan de Dios attempts to lasso a horse that wanders past him, but the spooked horse charges through a nearby cabin, trampling to death an Indian woman in the doorway. From inside the cabin, Juan de Dios hears the voice of a little girl calling out, “*Mamá!*,” to which he responds, “Come out, *muchachita!*” Rather than following his orders, the girl replies that her “name [is] Dolores and she [does] not desire to be called ‘*muchachita,*’ and that she [is] thirsty, and where [is] her *mamá?*” (12). In reproofing Juan de Dios and boldly asserting her name, Dolores claims a distinct space for herself within the narrative. Her introduction to Juan de Dios also includes the declaration that she is thirsty, a subtle but important reference to lack of fresh drinking water for people, and especially indigenous women and children, in the city.

Further, in this early scene Mena’s story suggests that indigenous ways of life retain a spiritual and physical wisdom about the natural world in which humans and other beings interact and coexist peacefully. When Juan de Dios first sees Dolores, she is “swaddled in coarse cloth, lying on a straw mat. Her head [is] tied up with fresh leaves of rosemary and mallow, which are sovereign for fever if allowed to wither on the skin” (13). Dolores is treated with traditional indigenous medicine under her mother’s care. That is, through the continued practice of traditional life-ways for indigenous people, Dolores’s mother is able to protect her daughter from harm during the earthquake, even if she is unable to save herself. When we shift the focus away from Juan de Dios to Dolores and her mother, who is killed by the quake, it becomes clear that these women pay a

disproportionately heavy price in the aftermath of the natural disaster, and that their presence demands consideration of deeply entrenched social inequalities which perpetuate and intensify environmental problems.

Sexual Violence and Neocolonialism in the *Porfiriato*

In the seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice drawn up by the delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991,⁸⁷ Principle No. 15 addresses the physical displacement of targeted communities during military takeovers and corporate development. “Environmental Justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.” Principle No. 11 explicitly “affirm[s] sovereignty and self-determination” for Native peoples. Both principles point to the simultaneous environmental and social destruction caused by colonialism and neocolonialism, which are land-based strategies tied to sexual violence and both of which clearly show up in Mena’s story about the struggle over water rights.

Following the opening scene of the earthquake in “John of God,” Juan de Dios, in his “blood remorse” for having killed Dolores’s mother, takes the orphaned girl into his care with the intent of eventually marrying her (14). Himself still a child, Juan de Dios brings Dolores home to live with him, pronouncing to his parents, “The *chiquita* will grow fat and strong for helping, and when she has taken her first communion I will marry her.” The unspoken part of this contract of labor and marriage is that Dolores, at the age

⁸⁷ The Summit was held in Washington D.C.

of nine or ten, will be forced to enter into a sexual relationship with Juan de Dios.⁸⁸ When she refuses to marry him and instead chooses to marry his brother, Tiburcio, Juan de Dios beats her, replacing one form of sexual violence with another.

That transference of sexual violence in Mena's story—Juan de Dios's replacement of marital violence with physical abuse of Dolores's body—conforms to and replicates colonialism's fundamental paradigm of race and gender. As Andrea Smith explains in *Conquest*, “[c]olonial relationships are themselves gendered and sexualized” (1).⁸⁹ By drawing on literary examples and testimonials, Smith shows that in colonial America, sexual abuse of Indian women was used as a means to establish control over indigenous people, as a way of breaking down indigenous matriarchal cultures and justifying the massacre and appropriation of indigenous people and land on the false premise that Indian women were dirty, animalistic, and “rapable” (10). Because many indigenous cultures traditionally treat genders equally, Smith explains that “[i]n order to colonize a people whose society was not hierarchical, colonizers [first had to] naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy” (23). Smith cites an example of the detrimental effects of this introduction of patriarchy to Ojibwe society in which “[w]ife battering emerged simultaneously with the disintegration of Ojibwe ways of life and the beginning use of alcohol” (qtd in Smith 20). For Mena's characters, the “disintegration of [Indian-Mexican] ways of life” is apparent when Juan de Dios is displaced from his pueblo and then again in Mexico City as he tries to preserve the *aguador* tradition that has been his

⁸⁸ When Dolores comes to Mexico City, she is described as “fourteen...and ready for marriage,” yet Mena states that Dolores is of the age to marry when she receives her first communion, which could be as young as 9 years old. See Mena, 14.

⁸⁹ Although Smith's research is on Native American women, it applies to Mexican women as well. See also Antonia I. Castañeda for a similar analysis on Amerindian women who live at the Mexican-U.S. border.

family's occupation for generations. Although there is no reference to Juan de Dios using alcohol in the story, his loss of a "way of life" is physically embodied in his loss of—and subsequent beating of—Dolores. Since he cannot "beat" the U.S. leaders of imperialism in Mexico, or the Mexico City elites who are switching to American-designed water-pumps, he beats Dolores:

[Juan de Dios] seized [Dolores's] wrists and shook them, making her whole body reel like a palm in a hurricane. "Don't beat me, don't beat me!" she sobbed. . . . He fetched a great sobbing breath and struck her in the face with the back of his hand, and then again with the palm, and then rained blows on her head and shoulders. (23)

A male-centric analysis of the text obscures the full significance of this scene, which is the most graphically violent scene in the story, because it privileges the environmental racism suffered by Juan de Dios over that suffered by Dolores. By contrast, a feminist ecocritical analysis reveals Juan de Dios ultimately taking out his own pain on Dolores's body. Her beating, which is likened to a hurricane, exposes the very real physical abuse indigenous women endure due to environmental racism and sexism.

The connection among colonialism, alcohol consumption, and wife battering is even more starkly depicted in Mena's story, "The Gold Vanity Set." Petra, whose "last memory of going to sleep was sometimes a blow, 'Because he is my husband,' as she explained it to herself," prays to the Virgin of Guadalupe that "she might be granted the 'beneficio' of a more frequently sober husband" (2). Here, Mena draws a clear correlation between alcohol and sexual abuse. After Spanish conquest of Mexico, the drinking of *pulqué* by Indians increased. In the 18th and 19th centuries began the

industrialization of *pulqué* by Spanish colonizers. This transformed *pulqué*, a traditional drink in local indigenous communities of Mexico thousands of years old, into a commodity for mass distribution and consumption. The cultural and spiritual significance of the drink was eliminated through this transformation, and the drink that was made locally in barrels and shared at community events, was now a drink that was taxed and served in inns/bars run by the Spanish *pulqué* industry (Kicza).⁹⁰ In “The Gold Vanity Set,” the white tourists who enter Manuelo’s father’s inn for *peons*, symbolize the imperial imposition of U.S. goods and technology. Even though a new, commodified *pulqué* was introduced by Spanish colonizers two hundred years before, the tourists represent the natural extension of Spanish colonialism into U.S. neocolonialism, the context for Manuelo’s alcoholism.⁹¹ These invading tourists are, by extension, the reason Manuelo beats Petra.

It is not until Petra takes from a white female tourist a gold vanity set—which can be read as an act of retribution for the long history of colonialism—and triggers a (natural) thunderstorm through her prayers to the Virgin of Guadalupe, that Manuelo vows to stop drinking and never beat her again. This is when Petra’s sexual abuse ends: in the moment of Petra’s *taking back* something from a white woman, an act with which nature cooperates in stormy rebellion and an act that draws on her deep faith in the religious icon, the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Like Petra in “The Gold Vanity Set,” the Marquesa in Mena’s most famous story, “The Vine-Leaf,” uses and ultimately transforms U.S. cosmetic exports for her own

⁹⁰ We see a similar instance in the U.S where reservations are surrounded by bars.

⁹¹ What is more, this commodification of *pulqué* foreshadows the commodification of water at which “John of God” hints, which is one of the greatest environmental problems of the 21st century.

survival. Schuller comments on both stories: “Far from depicting elite and indigenous Mexican women as passive consumers in the neocolonial marketplace, . . . Mena shows how beauty products [vanity sets] and services [cosmetic surgery] can be appropriated as limited yet potent acts of resistance” (4). As both Mies and Salleh explain, medical technology has a long history of targeting women for sexual violence and dominance and even population control. “The Vine-Leaf” challenges this history, although I would argue that the ways in which it does so are not obvious. Schuller points out that the Marquesa represents Mexican female resistance because cosmetic surgery literally saves her life by erasing the environmental mark on her body that discloses her identity. But her resistant act is only made possible through the submission of her body and soul to Dr. Malsufrido, as described by the story’s unnamed narrator: “It is sure he has a courtly way with him that captivates his female patients, of whom he speaks as his *penitents*,⁹² insisting on confession as a prerequisite of diagnosis, and declaring that the physician who undertakes to cure a woman’s body without reference to her soul is a more abominable kill-healthy than the famous *Dr. Sangrado*, who taught medicine to *Gil Blas*” (88). While feminist analyses of the Marquesa read the character as an empowered mestizo woman who takes biotechnology into her own hands, it cannot not be overlooked that she wields her power through wealth and through submission to Dr. Malsufrido.⁹³

I argue that there is another hero in the story, a character which criticism on this short story has failed to address: the unnamed narrator who introduces the story of Dr. Malsufrido with these opening words, “It is a saying in the capital of Mexico that Dr.

⁹² “Repentant sinners,” see Doherty.

⁹³ This is not to say that the Marquesa’s wealth cannot be interpreted as a source of empowerment, but that as readers we must acknowledge that her class privilege gets her the doctor’s attention in the first place.

Malsufrido carries more family secrets under his hat than any archbishop, which applies, of course, to family secrets of the rich. The poor have no family secrets, or none that Dr. Malsufrido would trouble to carry under his hat” (87). The narrator, who is presumably a version of Mena herself, invites an even more radical feminist interpretation than that which is told by Dr. Malsufrido. In the opening pages, this narrator pokes fun at the surgeon, going into a long description of his hat, which has “a furry look,” and jokes about his “dyed black hair,” age, and “edifying personality.” Even when s/he states with a kind of reverence that the doctor “looks like one of the early saints,” s/he swiftly follows it with an incisively witty negation: “I’ve forgotten which one” (87). Later, the narrator boldly states, “everybody knows that [the doctor] has been dosing good Mexicans for half a century.” The narrator’s sarcasm up to this point reveals that s/he is most likely Mexican/mestiza/indigenous herself, especially when she mocks the doctor for his cultural, racial, and economic background: “He is forgiven for being a Spaniard on account of a legend that he physicked royalty in his time, and that a certain princess—but that has nothing to do with this story” (87). Because the narrator is never named or gendered, her/his tone consequently leaves open the question of whether s/he may be an Indian woman who sees past the doctor’s savvy storytelling. This mocking narrator calls upon the reader to question the doctor’s abuse of patriarchal, Western European (white) power and to consider who gets to tell the stories and keep the secrets. No matter how one interprets the Marquesa’s course of action in the story, cosmetic surgery—like colonialism and imperialism—ultimately requires “the same masculinist mentality which would deny [women their] right to [their] own bodies and [their] own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way”

(Shiva, Mies 14).) The “masculinist mentality” behind cosmetic surgery becomes even more apparent within the historical context of eugenics and exploitation of women of color for experimental use in testing and implementing new medical technologies.⁹⁴ By framing “The Vine-Leaf” with the unnamed narrator’s incisive remarks, Mena ultimately is able to offer an alternative feminist perspective on the story’s central theme of biotechnology, one that gets at the root of why and for whom such technologies are developed in the first place.⁹⁵

A critical discussion of technology, violence, and women’s bodies is also encouraged by Mena’s “Son of the Tropics,” a story that depicts the very real threat of rape for Mexican women at the turn of the century. Mena describes Dorotea “riding alone and fearlessly” to a hill beyond the valley followed by her capture by a group of men who are part of the revolution:

Presently she caught sight of two horsemen on a hill at her right. They were looking down at her. So still they stood against the sky that for one instant she actually experienced “flesh of chicken,” . . . Suddenly, as she reached the shoulder of a hill, she was almost unhorsed by the rearing of the animal as a hand seized the bridle; and she found herself surrounded

⁹⁴ Environmental Justice Principle No. 13 “calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.” See Mies and Shiva as well as “Principles.”

⁹⁵ This is not to say that technology cannot be used in such a way to protect women or give them agency. Cosmetic and reconstructive surgery for women who are victims of acid throwing, for example, is crucial. Yet in many cases the technologies themselves have developed both out of and in response to long-standing institutions of sexism and racism. See Sheila Jasanoff’s “Technologies of Humility” for a valuable discussion on how one might approach “integrat[ing] the ‘can do’ orientation of science and engineering with the ‘should do’ questions of ethical and political analysis” (243).

by armed men. (139)

Here, Mena abruptly shifts her narrative to Dorotea's father waking up at home to discover his daughter missing, abandoning further description of what happens to Dorotea. This frightening image with which the reader is left—of a single woman surrounded by armed men in the wilderness—signals the threat of rape and is intensified by an earlier description of Dorotea riding into the valley as observed by women water carriers of the *pueblo*: “They watched her until she was swallowed up in the mist, and long after they watched for her to reappear, but she did not” (138).⁹⁶ Mena's literary technique of shifting the narrative creates a tension for the reader who, like the women of the *pueblo*, waits for the Dorotea's reappearance so that we can know that she is safe.

In fact, when Dorotea is captured by the revolutionaries, her father assumes that she has been raped. He goes out in search of her: “Restlessly, but without expectation, like the eyes of a mechanical figure, [his eyes] searched for a girlish form unhorsed and lying disabled in some hollow” (144). When he finally reaches the revolutionary encampment, he cries out to the people there, “Only tell me that she is safe . . . Tell me that you have not molested her!” Although Dorotea seems to be healthy and happy upon reuniting with her father (he searches her eyes for any sign of trauma), she has also been mysteriously converted to the revolutionary cause. Her newfound allegiance to the peasant movement is eerily reminiscent of the loyalty of young Tula to Rosario, the local general of the revolution. Such sudden and unquestioning devotion by these women suggests the possibility of their forced consent to Rosario's desires, an idea that is

⁹⁶ Such descriptions of nature as menacing for women (she is also described as entering “stretches of rougher land” where the “country grew wilder”) underscore the environmental justice issue of fair and equal access to nature, regardless of race or gender. (139)

reinforced by Mena's coded descriptions of environmental violence targeting women in an era of technological advancement and increasingly globalized industry.⁹⁷

Mena paints an image of Rosario as a powerful male leader who uses new technologies imported from the U.S.,⁹⁸ studies the great monarchs of ancient Greece and Rome, and owns not only a pet goat (a marker of nobility), but apparently also Tula, who labors for him for free:

Seated before a rude table at the mouth of a fern-grown cave, General Rosario was laboriously teaching his fingers the use of an American typewriter stolen from the *hacienda*. Admiring eyes watched him as he perspired over the transcription of a page from Plutarch's *Lives*, pausing at intervals to bestow a piece of sugar-cane upon a pet kid which lay across his knees . . . On a box of dynamite a few feet away, a phonograph . . . was rendering a potpourri from *The Prince of Pilsen* . . . [while] Tula, the barber's daughter, sat on the ground, making dynamite bombs out of doorknobs purloined from the *hacienda*. . . . [Tula] never removed her eyes from Rosario, except to make atrocious faces at the little animal which monopolized his caresses. (145)⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Technologies of power (as opposed to Sheila Jasanoff's proposed "technologies of humility") and globalized industry have significant negative impact on both humans and the environment. Environmental Justice Principle No. 14 "opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations." Principle No. 8 seeks to protect laborers within a global capitalist system, "affirm[ing] the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment."

⁹⁸ These include a typewriter and phonograph, which, although invented several decades earlier, would have been novel technological devices in rural Mexico at the beginning of the 20th century.

⁹⁹ Gustav Luders's *The Prince of Pilsen* (1903) was a popular operetta at the time about a widowed brewmaster who is mistaken for the Prince of Pilsen, Carl Otto. The plot of

Tula's labor alone produces the brigade's boxes of dynamite, implicitly tying the potential environmental and human cost that comes with using military explosives to the violence perpetrated against women through unjust labor practices in a growing economy. Moreover, Mena describes Tula as acting submissively to Rosario, gazing up at him with adulation and, later, speaking kindly yet timidly to him despite his cold indifference to her, suggesting that Rosario holds sexual domination over her. In this scene, Tula also appears jealous of the baby goat that is straddled across Rosario's lap, yet the pet is merely a status symbol for Rosario, who desires to be like the heroes of Plutarch's *Lives*.¹⁰⁰ Here it is hinted that Tula may have at some point experienced Rosario's "caresses," caresses that signal an abuse of patriarchal power (on both women and animals) by Rosario. The picture Mena paints of Tula here conjures images of present-day *maquiladora* workers at the Mexican-U.S. border who struggle against deplorable working conditions and regular abuse by their male employers.¹⁰¹ Despite Rosario's defiant and "pure" attitude in his revolutionary ideals, he disregards both Tula and, as it is revealed later, the earth, which he bombs twice before killing himself (150). Salleh explains the environmental problem of Rosario's liberation here: "If emancipation of working men is achieved, on the one hand, by forcing women deeper into a precarious domesticity, on the other hand it is achieved at the expense of people of colour [sic], drawn in around the margins of the paid workforce. The cost of economic justice for a

mistaken identity mirrors Rosario's own, who soon discovers that he is the son of Don Rómulo.

¹⁰⁰ In ancient Rome and Greece, pets were popular and sometimes a symbol of status. See Lazenby.

¹⁰¹ A subtext in several of Mena's stories is prostitution and more overt forms of systematized sexual violence (common occurrences of rape and sexual mutilation) in Mexico. See Bliss.

masculine proletariat has meant intensified sexual abuse, racism and environmental assault” (189). Rosario’s stoic principle of “live free or die” is only made possible at the cost of the lives of women, children, animals, and the natural environment around him.

Smith explains the unique position of indigenous women, a group of people targeted for environmental violence as a result of multiple and entwined layers of discrimination: “[W]hile both Native men and women have been subjected to a reign of sexualized terror, sexual violence does not affect Indian men and women in the same way. When a Native woman suffers abuse, this abuse is an attack on her identity as a woman and an attack on her identity as a Native. The issues of colonial, race, and gender oppression cannot be separated” (8). The beating of Petra and Dolores are examples of this. In juxtaposition to Miss Young, the white female tourist, Petra has very little mobility within a social system that requires her to work as the eye-candy for drunk men at an inn. And in comparison to Juan de Dios, Dolores suffers physical abuse by men along with the economic and cultural depletion of all poor Mexicans due to Western development in Mexico. Smith importantly points out: “Communities of color . . . often advocate that women keep silent about sexual and domestic violence in order to maintain a united front against racism” (Smith 1). But racism and sexism are intricately related issues that can and must be simultaneously addressed in literary criticism. As bell hooks states, “Any individual committed to resisting politics of domination, to eradicating sexism and racism, understands the importance of not promoting an either/or competition between the oppressive systems. We can empathize with the victim and the victimizers . . .” (*Yearning* 64). The strength of women of color does not negate the fact that they also carry the heaviest environmental burden. The two (strong resistance and suffering) are

not mutually exclusive. Environmental justice is a women's movement *because* women have risen to combat the disproportionately egregious violence perpetrated against them. It is important to read the violence alongside the resistance when interpreting women's roles in indigenous texts, otherwise it is solely the man's burden that is acknowledged and empathized with. Following Rosario's death we can imagine, then, the possibility of Dorotea, who rode bravely into the woods alone, and Tula, who witnessed the role her "handiwork" played in the demise of her master, joining forces in their resistance.

Women and the Modernization of Mexican Water Systems in "John of God"

"Water is the matrix of culture, the basis of life"

—Vandana Shiva, from *Water Wars*

After Juan de Dios's father tells him not to continue in the family line of *aguadors*, a vocation under threat during a critical time in Mexico when peasants were rising up to fight for land law reform under the oppressive rule of Porfirio Díaz, the young man leaves his *pueblo* for Mexico City with a plan to make a living as an *aguador* on his own terms. Once in the capital, he quickly learns the "code of manners for *Inditos*" and works tirelessly, taking "fewer holidays than most *peons*"¹⁰² (18, 19). His residence is a shared room at the back of a cellar, "where the odors of dried fish and vats of wine mingled with the dust of the charcoal nightly swept into the farthest corner . . . to make place for his sleeping-mat" (18). Despite racial discrimination, long work hours, and harmful living conditions, Juan de Dios is satisfied in his work and feels "very happy" when, once a month, he exchanges his hard-earned centavos for silver pesos which he buries in his first-worn water jugs for safekeeping (18).

¹⁰² Landless laborers or those working in compulsory servitude.

Yet when “a new and mischievous spirit in the air, a spirit named ‘modern improvement’” begins to mechanize the water transport systems of Mexico City, the Indian *aguador* begins to struggle both financially and spiritually (19):

Was it the will of God that water should run upstairs, except in jugs sustained by the proper legs of a man? . . . Was it for him, Juan de Dios, to become a confederate in these mysteries by hauling and thrusting that painted stake, instead of making many sociable trips between the fountain and the kitchens of his customers? No! He would not so endanger his soul. (19)

Here, Mena emphasizes that the drastic change to water systems in Mexico City not only had a physical impact on citizens, but also a spiritual one, since the loss of the *aguador* tradition is tied to the collective identity of indigenous people. In *Water Wars*, Vandana Shiva explains this connection between cultural identity and resource rights:

Destruction of resource rights and erosion of democratic control of natural resources, the economy, and means of production undermine cultural identity. With identity no longer coming from the positive experience of being a farmer, a craftsperson, a teacher, or a nurse, culture is reduced to a negative shell where one identity is in competition with the “other” over scarce resources that define economic and political power. (xii)

Because Juan de Dios’s identity is rooted in generations of *aguadors* work in his family, as well as in a way of life for indigenous people who have struggled for thousands of years to protect their resources, including water, he refuses to pump water for his employers.

Juan de Dios's resistance to the mechanization of water systems is in response to a long, entwined history of deculturation and environmental degradation targeting indigenous Mexicans. Disregard for indigenous knowledge of water systems and community sustainability by early Spaniards and, later, by Porfirio Díaz's economic growth agenda—during the time in which Mena was writing—ultimately resulted in the pollution and depletion of Mexico's water resource that continues to this day.

Historically, Mexico City was surrounded by five lakes, providing a sustainable water resource to indigenous people living there, but when the Spaniards arrived, they quickly depleted this water resource in their greed and development of inefficient water systems. Centuries later, in 1900, when over-extraction of ground water in the Mexico City area resulted in flooding and water contamination, the Mexican government built the Gran Canal in an attempt to drain the city:

In Mexico City, the draining and cleansing of the menacing environment, and thus the conquest of the water that had besieged it throughout its history, was seen as an essential requirement for its prosperity and modernity, and this conquest was also regarded as an indicator of progress and civilization” (Agostoni 115).

The Gran Canal, which was built through the labor of Indians, “symbolized the triumph of science and technology,” and yet the canal only resulted in increased water access disparities for people in Mexico City, as well as severe pollution of water in and around the area (122).

In “John of God,” the mechanization of water transport systems widens the gap between a small percentage of privileged, “middle class” residents and the majority of

people, who were poor. Thus, in Mena's narrative, the plumber—who symbolizes modernization—is characterized as “the worker of evil and oppressor of God's poor” (19). In a historical account of the Porfiriato, Michael Johns details this disparity between rich and poor living in Mexico City:

New pumping stations were installed in the southwest part of the city in 1910, when potable water began to arrive via aqueducts from newly tapped springs in Xochimilco. . . . But potable water and adequate sewage could not have offset the city's substandard housing, its people's poor diet, and their unhygienic living conditions. (Johns 470)

Moreover, he explains that the new systems for transporting drinking water and sewage were not accessible to most people:

Except for those living downtown and in the western suburbs, few drank water from a spigot. The lack of drinking water was worsened by a sewer system that was fully operational only in the new western neighborhoods, patchy in the downtown district, and absent entirely from the large eastern slums . . . (46)

Economically disadvantaged people living in the capitol, including racial minorities and all women, clearly were not meaningfully involved or considered in the planning, implementation, and maintenance of these new water transport systems, which were ultimately rendered unsustainable.

Despite the seeming efficiency of water pumps, mechanization of water resource extraction and conveyance in fact had detrimental physical impact on laborers. When his brother, Tiburcio, comes to the city to work with him, Juan de Dios offers detailed

instruction on how to bring water to the wealthy patrons in the city, but forgets to warn him against consenting to work the “highly painted and patented American force-pumps” (20). Consequently, Tiburcio is lured by words of praise and silver pieces into agitating the pumps for residents on his route. The physical labor cripples him: “When his arms failed him he continued by employing the weight of his body . . . On abandoning the third pump Tiburcio felt a weight in his chest, and his legs bent under him like green twigs . . .” (22). It is no coincidence that at the same time Tiburcio succumbs to his labor-induced physical pain, Juan de Dios beats Dolores at a nearby fountain. The fountain actually symbolizes the thing which Juan de Dios most fears losing (more than his fear of losing Dolores): a traditional way of life that is tied to his identity. While this scene explicitly shows that Tiburcio suffers the direct, literally crippling impact of modernization in Mexico City at the turn of the century, it also points to Juan de Dios’s spiritual loss, and ultimately portrays Dolores—beaten in the shadow of the fountain—as the one who pays the biggest price for urban development.

Although Juan de Dios is the *aguador* in this story, women of the southern hemisphere are the water carriers in real life, and therefore the people most susceptible to injury as a result of the overwhelming physical labor of carrying water, to sickness due to exposure to unsanitary water, and to the greater destructive effects of modernization to their livelihood and way of life.¹⁰³ Throughout Mena’s stories we see these women water-carriers, even though such references are often seemingly buried. In “The Gold Vanity Set,” for example, when Mena describes how Petra’s “attractions made her useful to her father-in-law,” Petra is also depicted as carrying water: “At the sight of her coming in

¹⁰³ See Shiva, “Introduction,” *Water Wars*.

from the well, as straight as a palm, carrying a large earthen pot of water on her head, the *peons* who were killing time [at the father-in-law's inn] would suddenly find themselves hungry or thirsty and would call for *pulqué* or something to eat" (2). The depiction of hungry and thirsty men here suggests that the men are not only literally thirsty for water, of which Petra is significantly the bearer, but also that they have a sexual hunger, or desire, for her body. Petra ultimately is forced to give up her job as water-carrier to work for her father-in-law at the inn, where she is sexually harassed on a daily basis. This change of job for Petra signifies the larger shift in water resources allocation from the majority to an elite few and its subsequent effect on women's labor and its role in sexual violence.

"Son of the Tropics" also features women water-carriers, who are briefly described in the scene when Dorotea embarks at sunrise on a "solitary adventure": "The few women, most of them old, who were carrying water from the rivulet, halted their great jars on their heads and turned to stare after the daughter of the master, riding alone and fearlessly toward the foothills" (138). In the story, Dorotea represents women's liberation at a time of revolution, and yet her brief sojourn is only made possible by her privileged position as daughter of a rich landowner, and the image of her galloping into the hills is contrasted by the image of these old women water-carriers and Tula—who works for the revolution making bombs—, women who are resigned to fulfilling their roles as laborers. What is more, Dorotea's freedom is actually overturned by the threat of capture and rape, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus all the women represented here are faced with daily sexism tied to environmental justice issues.

Today, environmental injustices related to water continue. According to Keith

Pezzoli, “Mexico City’s poorest residents use the smallest amount of water but typically pay the most for it” (60).¹⁰⁴ These residents largely consist of indigenous men and women, and since women’s role in such a community is to manage water use within the family, they are most severely impacted by water distribution disparities imposed by the Mexican government and neocolonialism. Mena’s “John of God” offers a clear example of this unjust history of modernization and water rights for indigenous women, a group of people whose stories of struggle for environmental justice past and present must be acknowledged if the global community is to achieve positive environmental change. “John of God” may be a story about the Indian male *aguador* for which it is named, but it is also a story about the neocolonial conquest of water throughout Mexico and, through the presence of Dolores, the resistance of indigenous women to very real, physical violence perpetrated against their bodies and their working and living environments within that neocolonial context.

Indigenous Women’s Resistance

Feminist ecocriticism draws a clear correlation between violence against women and violence against the land, while at the same time it resists simply placing women and land into a single category as victims of patriarchal, capitalistic conquest and control.

Women, like the earth that replenishes itself as well as wreaks havoc, are strong forces of resistance. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies explain women’s unique insight which allows

¹⁰⁴ Pezzoli elaborates on this disparity: “the urban poor in the city’s irregular settlements use as little as twenty liters of water per person per day. . . So few liters may be enough for cooking and drinking but more than double this amount is required for maintaining adequate sanitation and a healthy environment. In comparison, people living in middle-class housing developments consume on average 300 to 400 liters of water per person per day” (60-61).

them to resist oppression not only for themselves but for all humans and non-human beings: “Wherever women acted against ecological destruction or/and the threat of atomic annihilation, they immediately became aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature, and . . . [in] denying this patriarchy we are loyal to future generations and to life and this planet itself. We have a deep and particular understanding of this both through our natures and our experience as women” (14). Women’s knowledge, and that of Indian-Mexican women especially, comes from a complicated history of conquest, colonialism, and imperialism, all of which dictate their relationships to the land. Identity for indigenous women is deeply rooted in a racial, ecological, and cultural community that has survived and continues to survive genocide over hundreds of years. It is also grounded in their daily work, which includes tending to water and food needs for their families: “Women’s work and knowledge . . . [are] uniquely found in the spaces ‘in between’ the interstices or ‘sectors,’ the invisible ecological flows between sectors, and it is through these linkages that ecological stability, sustainability and productivity for resource-scarce conditions are maintained” (Shiva and Mies 167). Indeed, “spaces in between” are also where we find indigenous women like Dolores within literary texts.

Both Petra and Dolores, who struggle against sexual physical abuse from men and negative environmental impacts, offer up sacrifices which uphold the virtues of the story’s central religious icon, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Petra seems to submit to her husband’s regular drunken beatings, while lighting candles to the Virgin of Guadalupe and praying that he will stop, because she offers up her body as a sacrifice for the well-

being of Juan de Dios and Tiburcio.¹⁰⁵ While Juan de Dios beats Dolores, for example, she repeats the proverb: “Who well loves thee will make thee weep” (23). Tey Diana Robolledo explains that because of this image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as unselfish giver, “Chicano literature abounds with dutiful mothers, wives, daughters, teachers, nurses, and other helpful, nurturing, compassionate figures of all kinds” (53). However, Robolledo goes on to explain that Guadalupe *is not* an unambiguous figure, but one containing much older figures such as Chiguaga or Tonantzin who symbolize, in addition to compassion and service, indigenous women’s anguish and rebellion. Through her constant devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe as depicted throughout the story, Dolores at last leads Juan de Dios and Tiburcio to the sacred fountain at the Villa de Guadalupe—a female controlled water source—where she is able to claim for herself a life free from sexual violence. In *Water Wars*, Vandana Shiva describes the healing influence of sacred waters and relates it to the transformative power of storytelling, both of which lead to ecological justice: “Sacred waters carry us beyond the marketplace into a world charged with myths and stories, beliefs and devotion, culture and celebration. These are the worlds that enable us to save and share water, and convert scarcity into abundance” (139). For Dolores, such a world of natural resource abundance is one that also sustains her indigenous culture and honors her right to freedom from sexual violence.

Taking Action as Readers, Critics, and Citizens

As Toni Morrison states, “Criticism as a form of knowledge is capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology but of its ideas as well; it can

¹⁰⁵ For more on the history of Virgin of Guadalupe, see Robolledo, 52-58.

dismiss the difficult, arduous work writers do to make an art that becomes and remains part of and significant within a human landscape” (9). An anticolonial feminist environmental justice approach to literature works to identify and examine the presence of indigenous women in all North American literary texts, because their presence is embedded in our history, and also because an understanding of the specific devastating environmental impact suffered and challenged by the world’s most vulnerable group of people is necessary if we are to embrace change for all people and non-human beings.

For many women of color, immediate activism must be prioritized to combat current, real-life atrocities, and that activism is in fact inseparable from theory.¹⁰⁶ Andy Smith underscores this point in regard to the experience of indigenous women: “[I]n the presence of impending genocide, [Native women] do not have time for feminists who sit around and theorize and write books all day” (33). My hope is to show that the *theoretical* approach I present in this chapter is in fact an *activist* approach, where the practice of reading indigenous women’s presences in the text is one that must be applied beyond literary texts to everyday life.

Through Dorotea and Petra, and especially through the seemingly peripheral characters Dolores, Tula, and the unnamed narrator of “The Vine Leaf,” Mena invites the reader to see how issues of colonialism, modernization, water rights, and sexual violence intersect in the lives of indigenous Mexican women. It is their stories of struggle and survival that will inspire change in the face of environmental crisis.

¹⁰⁶ See “Theory of the Flesh” by Moraga as well as Vandana Shiva on real, life consequences.

CHAPTER FOUR

Life and Death in the Great Cities: Urban Environmental Justice Struggles in Contemporary Native American Literature

In 2003, I began working with homeless and low-income Native people at one of the largest community feeding programs in Seattle.¹⁰⁷ I was surprised that a disproportionately large percentage of the lunch patron population was Indian, approximately 50%. I was surprised, too, when many Native people who lived on the streets of Seattle, including the lunch patrons, but also others, would spontaneously ask me what my tribe was. I am of mixed Japanese and Euro-white descent, and yet they saw me as Native. This immediately made me aware of how close-knit the community is—that a Native homeless person would call out to a fellow indigenous person on the street, despite class or other differences. During my time at the Community Lunch I developed friendships with people in the Native community that eventually led to invitations to powwows and many a story-telling session over peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and stock beef stew.

It wasn't until much later, in graduate school, that I began to study and understand the gross injustices perpetuated against Native Americans by white colonizers and

¹⁰⁷ While terminology is disputed within the U.S. Native community, I will use interchangeably the terms Indian, Native American, Native, and indigenous to refer to people whose ancestors lived in North America for thousands of years prior to European colonization. In Seattle, for example, the people among whom I worked used the term "Native." For background on the cause for dispute, see p. 13 of Sherman Alexie's poem-essay "An Unauthorized Autobiography of Me," for example.

My chapter title is a reference to Jane Jacob's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), a groundbreaking urban planning study that pays attention to the injustices faced by disadvantaged inner-city communities.

through institutionalized racism, along with indigenous people's continuing fight for sovereignty. It took me so many years to realize that the Indian "cultural center" near my childhood home on the western edge of the city that juts out into the Puget Sound was not for *me*, an outsider and tourist, but was a hub for Native sovereign-rights activism in the city. I learned that this cultural center was fought for and won after the Indian takeover of the defunct Fort Lawton in 1970, a movement that was in reality less of a takeover than a *taking back* of Indian land in accordance with a 100-year-old treaty with the U.S. government.¹⁰⁸ Such land-based struggles—which both take place in cities and originate because of their development—in addition to urban environmental issues of pollution and hazardous living and working conditions, constitute environmental justice issues for Indians living in cities today. This chapter examines how these issues are represented in the works of several contemporary Indian writers, including prose and poetry by Simon Ortiz, Peter bluecloud, Louise Erdrich, and David Treuer, in order to show that the indigenous fight for environmental justice does not just take place on reservations, but is a movement that has taken on new forms in urban settings, where 78% of Native Americans live today.¹⁰⁹ Through an antiracist ecocritical reading of urban U.S. Native literature, I show that environmental problems are bound and exacerbated by past and present racism toward Indians, profit-driven industrialization, and uneven urban development.¹¹⁰

My work here builds on research done by Native scholars and activists, and is not intended to speak for the experiences of Native Americans, but rather to introduce ways

¹⁰⁸ For more information on the Fort Lawton occupation see *Indians of All Tribes*, p.56.

¹⁰⁹ From the 2010 U.S. census.

¹¹⁰ For the concept "uneven development," see Neil Smith's *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*.

of considering how urban environmental injustices and acts of resistance are represented in Native literature, particularly since such issues are in large part obscured in both real-life and literary studies. As a non-Native person doing research and presenting analyses on Native literature, I want to resist the colonial violence that is often perpetuated through academic scholarship by white people, paying particular attention to what Native scholars have to say about outsider appropriation of Indian experience and knowledge. The term “research” itself is contested among Native thinkers because, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains, “[f]rom the vantage point of the colonized [it is] inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (1). Furthermore, Native thinkers argue that the theoretical framework for analyzing Native literature must break from white-Euro traditions that perpetuate colonialism through deculturation. Ojibwa poet and critic Kimberly M. Blaeser insists that “[a] fuller understanding of Native literary traditions cannot flourish when the interpretive theories, the tools of literary analysis, all stem from an other/another cultural and literary aesthetic” (266). I seek to work against these racist and neocolonial research practices and writing in my own scholarship. It is my hope to bring to the attention of non-Native readers and scholars the experiential struggles for environmental justice that are foundational to the stories of Native peoples just as they are foundational to the environmental and social history of our academic institutions—which, at their most basic level, are literally built on indigenous lands. An antiracist ecocriticism is committed to research and analyses of Native American environmental justice narratives that relies on Native interpretive theories.

An Antiracist Ecocritical Approach to Native American Literature

The struggle for environmental justice among Native American peoples has been clearly delineated by activists and scholars as the fight for rights to ancestral lands and as specific battles against the placement of toxic sites—from incinerators to uranium mining to radioactive waste storage—in Indian Country.¹¹¹ Indeed, these struggles epitomize the environmental justice movement, where this racial minority group is consistently targeted for environmental hazards and the injustices are a clear extension of white Euro-American colonization. The uranium radon fallout in Navajo country in Nevada, for example, is currently ranked highest on the EPA's superfund list.¹¹² Such ecocide is tied to the livelihood of Navajo peoples, as evidenced by the fact that since World War II, cancer rates for this particular population have increased exponentially.¹¹³ For many Indians, then, the fight for environmental justice participates in the larger struggle for sovereignty. Jace Weaver explains how the two movements are inextricably linked:

Without question, Native control over their lands and resources is a matter of sovereignty. No less so, however, is power over the environment in which Native people live—issues affecting their peoples' health, the air they breathe, the water they drink and from which they get their sustenance, the safety of the soil on which they walk and from which they derive their food. (19)

¹¹¹ See, for example, LaDuke (1999), Weaver (1996), and Adamson (2001).

¹¹² EPA superfund sites are hazardous locations designated by the U.S. government for clean up.

¹¹³ Exposure to radiation has resulted in high lung cancer rates among Navajo uranium miners. The Center for Third World Organizing 1986 study "Toxics and Minority Communities" confirmed that, due to nuclear waste in ground water, the cancer of reproductive organs among Navajo teenagers is 17 times the national average (Schraeder-Frechette 11-12).

At their root, the battles for sovereignty and environmental justice respond to the colonization of Indian peoples and land by white Euro-Americans. As the literary examples I discuss later in this chapter show, these conjoined battles continue for Indians today who live in urban environments.

In her valuable study, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (2001), Jodi Adamson explains the importance of applying environmental justice perspectives to analysis of Native American literature. She argues that such an examination is necessary for ecocritical studies in order to combat the dominating perspectives of white male writers in the field.¹¹⁴ In addition, she shows how Native literature resists abstract, theory-laden analyses and instead encourages readers to grapple with concrete, contemporary environmental issues faced by Native American communities. She grounds her own analyses in real-life classroom experiences and interactions with people from Native communities. In one anecdote about teaching, Adamson relates how her students taught her new ways of interpreting Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*:

I might begin by drawing students' attention to Tayo's mystical connection to nature and his journey to wholeness, but my students would redirect our focus to the ways in which American Indians have been stereotyped for far too long by environmentalists and by others as the

¹¹⁴ In particular, Adamson presents a way of analyzing literature that departs from ecocriticism's narrow focus on traditional white nature writers: "Whereas the nature writer retreats from human culture to observe the flora and fauna, the American Indian writer maps a landscape replete with meaning and significance for the people who have lived there for long periods of time and often in circumstances in which they have suffered a marginalization and impoverishment connected to the degradation of their environment" (17).

people with an ancient wisdom that alone can save the planet. Discussions of Tayo's symbolic battle with the 'Destroyers' to save the earth were transformed into discussions of the novel's depiction of the literal radioactive poisoning of the Four Corners communities where many of the students live. (xv)

Adamson combats environmentally-based stereotypes of Indians as mystics (shamans) and as uncivilized (savages) and instead presents Native views of nature as sacred and their ancient civilizations as sophisticated, emphasizing the reality of their suffering on account of violence committed by white people to their lands and people.¹¹⁵ Antiracist literary analysis that grounds Native literature in material truths recognizes institutionalized racism and refuses to gloss over the immediacy of environmental justice issues for Native peoples, which have been and continue to be a matter of survival for them.

While Adamson's materialist approach to analyzing Native literary works appears to be exemplary of an antiracist ecocriticism, Ojibwe author David Treuer argues that identifying and accentuating specific truths as characteristic of Indian American poetry and fiction risks pigeonholing Native literature as merely "cultural" material. In his essay, "Reading Culture," Treuer claims that grounding literature in history and culture negates the appreciation of literary form as art for art's sake, a critique that seems to emerge from a legitimate worry over both essentialism and continued categorization of Native

¹¹⁵ The stereotype of Indians as "uncivilized" is debunked when one looks at the history of their ancient civilizations. For example, in the 12th century, Cahokia, which is located near present-day St. Louis, MO, was as large as London with a population of 10-20,000 in the city proper, and 30,000 in the surrounding 50-mile radius. See Jack D. Forbes's "The Urban Tradition among Native Americans" and Henry Marie Brackenridge's "Envisioning Great American Indian Cities."

literature as “Other” and thereby “not as good as” mainstream American literature. Treuer is also concerned about the tendency for non-Indians to view unquestionably Native-authored texts as “authentic.” Yet this problem of pigeonholing is due in part to the fact that cultural critiques of Native literature often emphasize questions surrounding Indian identity that are divorced from examination of socio-political issues. Sandy Grande explains what is at stake by sticking to only a “discourse of identity politics” for Native Americans: “By displacing the real sites of struggle (sovereignty and self-determination), the discourse of identity politics ultimately obfuscates the real sources of oppression—colonialism and global capitalism” (92). While questions concerning identity for Native Americans are valuable and not necessarily undermined by “essentialist” arguments, an abstract discussion of contemporary American Indian identity takes attention away from important discussions about immediate material struggles for environmental justice, struggles which arise directly from the legacy of colonialism and the reality of present-day neocolonialism within a capitalist global economy.

Adamson calls on ecocritics to look at the actual lives of Indians in their living spaces, what she calls “contested places”—“on reservations, in open-pit uranium mines, and in national and international borderlands”—where the battle continues for sovereignty on ancestral homelands.¹¹⁶ The battle is one for land title rights, rights to natural resources, rights to protect the environment, and rights to protect the people living there from toxic waste and/or work sites. Although Adamson briefly analyzes Sherman Alexie’s short stories featuring the urban environment of Seattle and draws a clear

¹¹⁶ See Adamson, pp. xvi-xvii.

correlation between “urban-industrial” impacts and environmental injustices on such “contested sites” for Native Americans, she does not comment on the battles being fought and won in cities across America, which is where the majority of Indians live today, often in obscurity.

Urban Indians and Environmental Justice Activism

Environmental Justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provided [sic] fair access for all to the full range of resources.

—from “Principles of Environmental Justice,” No. 12

In 1952, the U.S. government initiated a program to move Indians off of reservations and integrate them into the workforce in cities. The majority of Indians moved to cities during this time, although many moved earlier due to dislocation by corporations that bought out their land, economic incentives to work in cities, and social factors including a sense of adventure and experimentation.¹¹⁷ The relocation package—which touted well-paying jobs, housing, and community in vibrant, growing urban centers—enticed Natives to move to cities with the false promise of BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) assistance. According to Indian activist and writer Adam Fortunate Eagle, many Native people complied in leaving their reservations because of “poverty, alcoholism, and desperation,” yet he makes clear that these harsh conditions were a result of long-standing, institutionalized racism: “Many people think that these conditions were

¹¹⁷ Nabokov offers examples of Indian relocation to cities during the first half of the 20th century: “After the White Earth Chippewa of Minnesota sold their timberlands in 1906, there was a big exodus to the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. For years the Mohawks of Upper New York State had driven to work on skyscrapers in Manhattan and establish Indian neighborhoods in Brooklyn” (336).

due to laziness, a sort of welfare mentality. They don't realize the conditions were a deliberate creation of the U.S. Government, the result of decades of manipulation, contempt, and control" (471). Relocation coincided with Termination, through which the U.S. government ceased recognition of Native reservations as sovereign lands and encouraged Indians to act as corporations and sell their lands in order to assimilate into mainstream culture where they would be subject to taxes and state laws. From the point of view of Native Americans, as documented by Adam Fortunate Eagle in his essays on urban Indian experience in the Bay Area, the main impetus for Termination was U.S. government desire to control natural resources on Indian land:

Considering all these natural resources, one would think that the BIA would have trained Indians to develop these resources to create jobs and wealth for all the Indians on the reservation. Self-sufficiency would have been the humane solution, but it might have interfered with the profit that stood to be made. The report stated that by withdrawing federal services to the tribes and eliminating the reservation system the government would save millions of dollars every year . . . [and so the government passed the Termination Act]. But when the government began to look at closing down the reservations, they ran into an interesting problem: the Indian reservations were full of Indians!¹¹⁸

The U.S. government's seemingly benevolent plan to assist Indians in finding jobs and new homes in cities across America was actually economically and politically motivated to increase the wealth of those—predominantly white men—in power. This

¹¹⁸ From *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!* by Adam Fortunate Eagle, p. 20.

environmental dislocation and land theft was devastating to Indian communities and the environment, from the confiscation and destruction of mountains and rivers that were sacred to Native Americans to the poisoning and depletion of the natural resources they depended upon for survival. In addition, Indians who moved to the cities found themselves in a new but familiar structural system of neocolonialism, where they now faced—in addition to the loss of family ties, cultural continuity, and religion—hazardous living and working conditions.

Studies that look at American Indian experiences in urban settings emerged about a decade following Relocation and Termination and focus on economic inequities, migration patterns, tribal identity and organization, pan-Indianism and community centers, the perceived failures of the BIA, as well as assimilation, primarily from an anthropological perspective.¹¹⁹ In the 21st century, book-length studies such as Joan Weibel-Orlando's *Indian Country, LA* (1999) have zeroed in on Indian communities living within specific cities, recognizing newly formed communities, each with their own distinctive social and political battles, including those related to identity formation and economic disparity.¹²⁰ Donald Fixico's *American Indians in a Modern World* (2008), which reads like an encyclopedia as it outlines key aspects of modern Indian lifestyles, challenges the stereotyped, preserved image of the "savage Indian," memorialized in

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Sorkin (1978) and Guillemin(1975). For a brief but thorough history of urban Indian studies see the introduction to Krouse and Howard's *Keeping the Campfires Going*, p.xi-iii.

¹²⁰ In addition to Weibel-Orlando, see LaGrande (2002). Such regional studies also emerged because it was easier to collect the data of smaller populations.

statues around the city where real Indians live today.¹²¹ With the exception of Susan Lobo and Kurt Peters's *American Indians and the Urban Experience* (2001)—the only book to incorporate scholarship, visual art, poetry, and personal essays to convey life in urban places for American Indians in the late 20th and 21st century—literature and urban studies programs have been slow to incorporate urban Indian studies. Lobo and Peters approach the project as “setting the record straight” (ix), which they insist must reflect the reality of urban, off-reservation life for Indians in America today. Lobo argues, “The rigid rural/urban dichotomy is not a true expression of Indian reality, yet it has been one of the molds and barriers that has continued to shape research, writing, and, to a lesser extent, creative expression” (xiii).¹²² Although there is a substantial amount of fiction and poetry that depicts urban Indian experiences, most of it is not widely published or recognized.¹²³

An example of contemporary urban Indian poetry is Esther Belin's “On Relocation,” which evokes the pain of being forcibly relocated to cities for Native Americans—an event that uproots not only physically (she writes, “The physical is easier

¹²¹ An example of such historical monuments that preserve the stereotyped image of the “savage Indian” is Cyrus Dallin's statue “Appeal to the Great Spirit” just outside the entrance to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

¹²² The dearth of scholarship and literature reflecting urban life is indicative of the publishing industry, which favors stories about Indians set on reservations. In the poem “The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me,” Sherman Alexie declares, “Indians often write exclusively about reservation life, even if they never lived on a reservation . . . Non-Indian writers always write about reservation life” (22). In “Who Gets to Tell the Stories?,” Elizabeth Cook-Lynn argues similarly that many people who do not represent Native experience in the U.S. get to tell the stories because the false stories (that enforce stereotypes and thereby white supremacy) sell.

¹²³ New urban Indian literature can be found in *Genocide of the Mind*, edited by Moore and Deloria, and in its sequel, *Sovereign Bones*, edited by Gansworth.

to achieve”), but also culturally, spiritually, and emotionally (line 1).¹²⁴ In particular, Belin’s poem highlights the diminution of tribal affiliations for Indians who are dispersed across cities throughout the U.S. and within the cities themselves. She describes relocation as the “country’s stem” that is “rooted for invasion / imperial in destiny,” suggesting that the removal of Indians is the basis or structural support (the stem) for neocolonialism (lines 5-8). When she writes that “Navajos say no word exists [for relocation],” she is being literal (line 3). According to the elders featured in *Broken Rainbow* (1985), a documentary about the forced relocation 10,000 Navajo Indians in Arizona, “There is no word for relocation in the Navajo language: to relocate is to disappear and never be seen again.” Belin’s poem also refers to the environmental health risks that would be carried over from the reservations to the cities: “brain-dead at birth from pollution ingested / umbilical cord of sweet grain alcohol and stick TV diaries” (lines 13-4). By weaving together the themes of birth defects, alcoholism, and technology, Belin highlights a long pattern of government-sanctioned displacement of Indians and toxic dumping in their communities.

Belin’s poetry offers a glimpse into the land-based struggles that continue for Native Americans after their relocation to urban areas. In the remainder of this chapter I rely on a range of literary examples to outline specific ways in which environmental concerns affect Indians living in the city, first looking at urban centers as hubs for environmental justice activism in the poetry of Simon Ortiz, then at Native struggles for land reclamation within city limits in Peter bluecloud’s record of the Alcatraz Occupation, and finally at everyday urban environmental struggles for clean and safe

¹²⁴ Belin, p.11.

living conditions in Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*. In the final section of this chapter I examine closely a range of urban eco-injustices as depicted in David Treuer's *The Hiawatha*, with a specific emphasis on environmental job blackmail and uneven urban development in 1970s Minneapolis during the era of high steel construction. I seek to make clear that many Indians continue the fight for environmental justice even while living off of reservations, and also that the underlying causes of such injustices are rooted in Euro-American colonization and for-profit industrialization. Environmental justice has always been a prominent issue for Native Americans, one that is basic to Native life and history in the fight for ancestral lands, and it must be looked at in conjunction with present-day injustices experienced by Native Americans living in urban environments.

Dislocation and Reclaiming “Home” through Urban Community Formations

In *Native Hubs*, Renya K. Ramirez argues that Paiute American activist Laverne Roberts's concept of “hubs” represents an important mobile site of resistance for Indians living in, and moving back and forth from, cities.¹²⁵ Ramirez's hubs primarily function as non-geographically fixed places for Indians across tribes to gather and forge alliances in the face of ongoing injustices including land seizure, the placement of toxic waste sites, and impoverished reservation living and working conditions. Examples of such hubs include sites for powwows, alliance meetings, sweat lodge ceremonies, and school board assemblies. Historian Peter Nabokov describes these hubs as “urban centers” that emerged out of the Relocation era:

¹²⁵ See Ramirez, p. 22-23.

[U]rban Indian centers, often located in basements or community halls, offered a rallying spot for city activism. From makeshift headquarters Indians offered the support services that government failed to provide in counseling, apartment hunting, legal assistance, and opportunities for companionship. (359)

Hubs are not bound to cities and are in fact formed on reservations as well as in the spaces in-between city and country. Mobility and spontaneity of formation are actually what give Native hubs their strength. These hubs, which emerged in response to the cultural and environmental injustices perpetrated by the U.S. government during Relocation, signify a cooptation of an oppressive system. In order to survive, Indians adapted to and fought back against dislocation and diaspora through hub-formations that supported pan-Indian solidarity.

Ramirez claims that the movement between cities and reservations allows for circulation of knowledge and thereby a more widely distributed and unified power in the ongoing battle for sovereignty: “[T]ravel . . . can be a purposeful, exciting way to transmit culture, create community, and maintain identity that ultimately can support positive changes for the Native American community across the country” (2). Jeanne Guillemin reinforces this idea of power vested in the transitory spaces traveled by urban Indians:

The material poverty of a reservation and the Indian “problem” in cities are important parts of Native American social organization, but they are not by themselves descriptive of the viable urban culture by which American Indians survive. Between the two geographically locatable

points of reservation and city circulates the mobile adult population of
Indians whose social activity is the very heartbeat of the community. (292)

This concept of “hub” as a site for socio-political activity and organized social change emphasizes cultural geography over physical geography. A hub wields power by virtue of being portable, constantly moving between sites on the reservation and in the city.

Simon Ortiz’s poetry and prose collection, *Woven Stone*, literally weaves stories that are the bedrock of his Acoma Pueblo culture into a travelling narrative that stylistically and thematically illustrates the author’s actual movement between cities and reservations, as well as his larger journey on the road of life. In the poem “We Have Been Told Many Things but We Know This to Be True,” Ortiz explains this important twofold fight for land and people:

The land. The people.
They are in relation to each other.
We are in a family with each other.
The land has worked with us.
And the people have worked with it.
.....
The people and the land are reliant
upon each other.
This is the kind of self-reliance that has been—
before the liars, thieves, and killers—
and this is what we must continue
to work for.

By working in this manner,
for the sake of the land and people
to be in vital relation
with each other,
we will have life,
and it will continue.

(Woven Stone 324-5)

This commitment to the continuance of land and people for Ortiz is rooted not only in reservation life, but also shines in his depiction of contemporary urban Indian experiences. Ortiz's urban Indians are often traveling from one city to the next, forming pan-Indian communities—or hubs—in bus depots, at informal social gatherings, and around ancient sacred sites. The unassuming conversations and gestures captured in his poetry reveal a close-knit pan-Indian community that sometimes appears vulnerable and mired in pain but that, significantly, also continues to survive despite five hundred of years of oppression caused by Euro-American colonization. While Ortiz does not explicitly depict environmental justice activist meetings in cities, his glimpses into alienating and impoverished urban life and the bonds formed among Natives coming and going from cities insist on a hope for coalition-building around environmental issues for Native Americans.

In the poem “Grants to Gallup, New Mexico,” for instance, Ortiz chronicles the journey between the two cities by naming specific sites of environmental injustice for Native Americans on the route—a uranium mine, railroads, oil companies, a mobile home town, the tourist Indian Village, and a military weapons storage unit (*Woven Stone*

241). About halfway into the road trip, the narrator picks up an Indian hitchhiker at Church Rock in Navajo Nation, an inter-tribal sacred natural rock formation and location of the largest radioactive waste spill in U.S. history. Here, Church Rock offers a poignant example of how the negative effects of capitalist-driven energy and technological weapons development in the U.S. are literally dumped on Native land and peoples, disrupting their spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. There is also significance in Ortiz's portrayal of hitchhiking, an act that is common in Indian culture and representative of spontaneous inter-tribal community formation through travel.¹²⁶

Significantly, Ortiz's journey ends in the city of Gallup, where the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC)—the nation's second oldest Indian organization—was founded in 1961. One of the primary struggles of the NIYC is the protection of treaty rights to ancestral lands as well as to traditional fishing and hunting practices, both of which constitute contemporary environmental debates that pit the protection of indigenous peoples and cultures against that of endangered animals such as whales and buffalo. As readers join Ortiz on this journey from Grants to Gallup, they, too, witness the multiple, devastating environmental and human impacts of U.S. colonization and industry, all of which are visibly interconnected and fixed in the landscape.

Ortiz's poetry abounds in such sites of pan-Indian community formation, or hubs, where traveling Indians, often moving between cities, in effect join resistant forces as they witness in solidarity the ongoing colonial destruction of their land and people. The poem "Some Indians at a Party" reveals how different tribes come to a single place

¹²⁶ Hitchhikers appear frequently in the stories by Native authors, say, for example, in works by Sherman Alexie.

through mobilization and environmental dislocation, some from cities and others from reservations:

“Where you from?”

Juneau

Pine Ridge

Sells

Tahlequah

Salamanca

Choctaw

Red Lake

Lumbee

Boston

Wind River

Nambe

Ft. Duchesne

Tesque

Chinke

Lame Deer

Seattle

Pit River

Brighton Res

Vancouver

Parker

Acoma

the other side, ten miles from Snow Bird.

That's my name too.

Don't you forget it.

(*Woven Stone* 219)

When Ortiz writes, “That’s my name too,” he is simultaneously referring to Acoma (where he, the poet, is from) and to *all* of the names on the list, proclaiming a brother/sisterhood among Indians (line 24). Likewise, Ortiz purposefully makes the phrase, “Don’t you forget it,” ambiguous (line 25); he may be reminding himself not to forget where he comes from or calling upon the Indians whose homeplaces he names to always remember their shared history of genocide, environmental dislocation, and survival as they continue in the struggle for sovereignty. He may also be addressing the reader, asking her/him to listen and understand that all urban Indians, despite coming from distinct geographic locations and tribes, are survivors and fighters of genocide and ecocide. Critic Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses the importance of “remembering” as one of twenty-five indigenous projects in her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. She states that, “[w]hile collectively indigenous communities can talk through the history of painful events, there are frequent silences and intervals in the stories about what happened after the event” (146). Smith explains further: “Often there is no collective remembering as communities were systematically ripped apart” (146). Indian poetry, like that of Ortiz, attempts to restore this collective remembering, and thereby restore a living community

of peoples in a highly urban and urbanizing world where land-based origins can become remote.

Such collective remembering is also sparked in the act of traveling, not only by chance meetings and through the experience of community hubs, but also through the new cultural and geographic perspectives gained. In “Spreading Wings on Wind,” Ortiz shares a moment of contemplation while traveling on an airplane between cities:

I must remember
that I am only one part
among many parts,
not a singular eagle
or one mountain. I am
a transparent breathing.

(Woven Stone 121)

Again, he shows here that it is through traveling, often to or from a city, that one is able to gain the holistic perspective about the meaningful interconnection among humans, animals, and the earth, a perspective that is crucial to environmental justice. Even more importantly, Ortiz gives the mountain and the eagle each independent status, whereas humans are described as wholly dependent on the earth, emphasizing that we must view the earth as that through which we breathe and therefore exist.

Like the narrator of Ortiz’s poem who is “only one part” of something much bigger, and lasting much longer, than him/herself, the city is a transitory construction of streets and buildings made out of the earth’s raw materials. Indigenous civilizations that maintained a balance between human life and other life-forms existed before these cities

were built. Consequently, urban environmental justice struggles include the fight for rights to land that once belonged to Indians, before the white colonizers transformed it into new, humanmade environments. One of the starkest examples of the struggle for the repossession of urbanized land is the Alcatraz Occupation of 1969, in which San Francisco Bay Area Indians reclaimed Alcatraz Island as sovereign territory. In “Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People” (1969), Indians of All Tribes explain clearly their reclamation of Alcatraz Island “by right of discovery” (Indians of All Tribes 40). The document begins by justifying the Indians’ reacquisition of the island for “[t]wenty-four dollars in glass beads and red cloth” and goes on to list, with some irony, the reasons why the impoverished and inhospitable Island is suitable for an Indian reservation; it concludes with details for use of the land to house various Indian centers for educational, spiritual, community, and ecological purposes (41-2). The occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 exemplifies urban struggles for land that extend beyond the reservations and recognizes cities as land originally belonging to Native peoples.

In *Alcatraz is Not an Island*, a publication from the Indians of All Tribes which includes testimony, documents, poetry, essays, visual art, and photos from the movement to take back Alcatraz, poet Peter bluecloud depicts the environmental ruin of the region by urban development. In “Alcatraz Visions,” he notes the “concrete fields” that cover the island (6), the “vertical fabrications” that “erase the rounded hills” of San Francisco (18), the “bright lights and sounds and smell of decay” emanating from the city center (19), and the “scene of white gaiety” on the bay, where snazzy sailboats and motorized warships have replaced traditional Native birch bark canoes (23-7). He sharply critiques the steel bridges that now stretch across the bay, bridges that cost lives during their

construction and which facilitate pollution due to heavy traffic as well as encourage segregation of people of color into pockets of impoverished neighborhoods around the Bay Area:

Steel bridges all around this Bay,
connecting land in bumper to bumper pain,
dreams of Alcatraz are of a different bridge,
fashioned of sunlight and soft voices. (lines 29-32)

This Alcatraz dream-bridge not only extends across tribes and cultures, but also stretches across time, connecting the youth of the Alcatraz movement to their ancestors, who originally lived there. It is also a bridge that connects meaningful, sustainable uses of the land, depicted by bluecloud in the image of Earth Mother joining the people in “a round dance”:

And I am only five hundred years old
and my dream is just now beginning,
as the drums of Alcatraz throb my spirit
and all the people do a round dance,

And our Earth Mother is in round dance
and all the stars circle our eagle dreams
and the children of Alcatraz run and play
and glad I am to be a youth of only five hundred years. (lines 41-8)

By claiming to be “only” five hundred years old, bluecloud simultaneously emphasizes a youthful belief in positive change and the prolonged duration of oppression of Indian

peoples. He leaves us with an image of a throbbing spirit moving the people and Mother Earth to dance in unity on reclaimed land, a vision of environmental justice that, in accordance with the Principles of Environmental Justice, “affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction” (“Principles”).¹²⁷

The themes of dislocation and recuperation for Indians in urban settings continue in the work of Louise Erdrich. Homelessness, as depicted in my personal experiences mentioned in the beginning of this chapter and in my analysis of *Tropic of Orange* in Chapter One, is another prominent environmental justice issue for Native peoples living in the city, who are forced out of their homes due to urban development that targets people of color, housing discrimination grounded in racism, and extreme poverty due to institutionalized racism. Homelessness is an environmental justice issue because it violates the right to a safe and healthy living environment as well as continues a long history of displacement of people (mostly people of color, the poor, women and children) from their homes by government and corporations who want to make money off of the land. As such, homelessness for contemporary urban Indians is an extension of five-hundred years of U.S. colonialism. Many Indian novels and poems feature, even if briefly, homeless Indian characters, including works by contemporary writers Sherman Alexie, Simon Ortiz, and Louise Erdrich.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Principle No. 1.

¹²⁸ Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*, for example, centers on the Native homeless population in Seattle, a close-knit community which Marie, “The Sandwich Lady,” gets to know well. Greg Sarris’s *Grand Avenue* tells the story of an Indian family struggling to survive in an urban ghetto of Santa Rosa, California.

Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife* portrays unequal access to natural resources along with the violation of cultural integrity for Native homeless people living in the city. The novel's Richard and Klaus are homeless Indian men living in Minneapolis who face daily a range of environmental hazards, such as unsafe drinking water. In the following scene, they are walking through downtown on a hot day, in search of a glass of water, until they finally arrive at the Mississippi River:

Klaus swayed to his knees and then painfully, slowly, he inched down the bank of the river, leaned over the edge to where the water began. At that place, he lowered his face like a horse. He put his face into the water, sucked the river into himself, drank it and drank it.

“That’s Prairie Island nuclear water,” Richard yelled.

Klaus kept drinking. (97)

By calling attention to the “nuclear water,” Erdrich highlights the devastating impact water pollution has had on indigenous communities, from contaminating food and water sources to breaking down significant cultural and spiritual beliefs tied to water, including the sacredness of salmon and rivers for Native Americans.¹²⁹ In defense of his friend Klaus, whom he realizes is too thirsty to give a damn, Richard reasons that the nuclear plant is further downstream, and cracks a joke that “a beaver might have pissed up near Itasca” (97). Yet Klaus keeps drinking—“drinking up the river like a giant”—and as Richard begins to worry, so, too, does the reader (98). Finally Richard yells to his friend again, “For sure . . . they dump the beef-house scraps in it up at Little Falls” (98). Klaus continues to drink the water as though he is quenching a thirst that has accumulated over

¹²⁹ See Janis Johnson’s article, “Saving the Salmon, Saving the People,” for more on the significance of salmon and water in American Indian cultures.

a lifetime, or perhaps over many lifetimes. While in reality all of Richard's claims about the poisonous water are valid, Klaus is unable to think about the dangers of contamination; he is drinking simply to survive. Evoking a long history of U.S. government sanctioned industrial and nuclear waste disposal into Native lands and waterways,¹³⁰ Erdrich implicitly aligns the homeless Klaus's thirst for water on a hot day to a thirst for justice after hundreds of years of environmental violence targeting Indians in North America.

Later in the novel, Erdrich offers a description of Minneapolis through Cally's narration that calls attention to its origins as a Native trading village:

Gakahbeking. That's the name our old ones call the city, what it means from way back when it started as a trading village. Although driveways and houses, concrete parking garages and business stores cover the city's scape, that same land is hunched underneath. There are times, like now, I get this sense of the temporary. It could all blow off. And yet the sheer land would be left underneath. Sand, rock, the Indian black seashell-bearing earth. (124-5)

This passage drives home the connection between colonization and Klaus's unquenchable thirst that brings him to poison himself; Erdrich reminds us that before European colonizers arrived in America and their descendants severely augmented the land, the land belonged to Indians. Klaus's thirst is not only a craving for immediate, individual sustenance, but also a desire for a return to the "Indian black sea-shell-bearing earth" that

¹³⁰ For this history, see the Introduction and Chapter Five in Winona LaDuke's *All My Relations*, as well as Grace Thorpe's essay in Jace Weaver's *Defending Mother Earth*, p.47-58.

during pre-colonial times sustained his people for thousands of years. The Principles of Environmental Justice acknowledge such colonial abuses of the land and peoples by calling for “universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food” as well as demanding that we “respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves.”¹³¹ Through the characters Richard and Klaus, Erdrich calls attention to the depletion, pollution, and unfair allocation of natural resources experienced and resisted by Native Americans living in cities, environmental justices for them that often go unrecognized outside of reservations.

Urban Development and the Fight For Fair Working Conditions in David Treuer’s *The Hiawatha*

An antiracist ecocritical reading of Ojibwe author David Treuer’s *The Hiawatha* reveals the racially motivated human and environmental destruction caused by rapid, uneven urban development in 1960’s Minneapolis.¹³² In particular, Simon and One-Two’s work in high steel construction reveals environmental injustices by showing that because of their racial identity they are denied the right to a safe and healthy work environment, in direct violation of the “Principles of Environmental Justice” and, I will

¹³¹ Principle No. 4.

¹³² Between 1957 and 1965, a total of 180 structures were leveled as well as 2,500 residents and 450 business displaced as part of the Gateway urban renewal project (Breen and Rigby 136). According to Breen and Rigby, “[It was] one of the nation’s largest and most devastating urban renewal efforts” (136).

show, a clear example of both environmental job blackmail and toxic colonialism.¹³³ In addition to depicting the literal immediate and far-reaching environmental hazards of high steel construction work, Truer infuses his story with meditations on life and death which offer insights into various environmental injustices suffered by Native Americans—often a matter of life or death—in a city that continually struggles to reinvent itself within its own cycle of destruction and renewal.¹³⁴

The novel opens with a portrait of the cycle of life and death for people living in Southside Minneapolis,¹³⁵ a prelude to the series of deaths faced by Simon, a young Ojibwe man who ultimately outlives the people (his father, brother, sister, nephew, and a close friend) and crumbling environments (downtown Minneapolis and the Ojibwe reservation) that in part shape his identity. Treuer depicts a group of homeless men, Simon among them, who discover a deer amid the rows of cars in a church parking lot as they are waiting in line for a meal provided by the church. The men are startled by this seemingly innocent life form—a “sliver of life”—which contrasts starkly with the urban landscape:

By 1981 death is not interesting to the Southside of Minneapolis, but this sliver of life, wild and strange amid the parked cars, this is news. When whole families freeze to death in abandoned houses, stacked like cordwood to share what heat they have, no one is surprised. (3)

¹³³ Environmental Justice Principle No. 8 “affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment.” For environmental job blackmail and toxic colonialism as core concepts of environmental justice, see, for example, the Introduction and Chapter One of Bullard’s *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*.

¹³⁴ Minneapolis has a high percentage of Indians living there, mostly Ojibwe/Chippewa. According to the 2010 census, the Native population in the city was 2%, which is higher than the national percentage of 1.7%.

¹³⁵ Southside Minneapolis is the urban ghetto, with over 50% people of color living there.

For the first time in a long time, the deer represents for these men an alternative to death. They are moved by its preserved vitality: “The men sitting on rolled foam or piles of rags stand and scoop their bedrolls from its path, and when their palms are placed out and pulled short they feel its animal warmth. They hold their hands there, fingers splayed, stealing its heat” (4). In his desire to feel the deer’s warmth, Simon, too, stretches out his hands. Unlike the others, however, he actually touches the deer, driving it from the “human forest” to the bordering freeway where it is first hit by a car, then flung into the air, and then hit twice more by other cars, until the crunch of bones and eruption of blood seem to blend indistinctly with the powerful force of metal and gas (5). Finally, the deer’s limp body is flung to “the litter-strewn shoulder, its head among the brown winter weeds where black garbage bags have caught fast and flutter like crows” (5). A symbol of nature that is destroyed by human touch and industrial machines, the deer is laid to rest on weeds suffocated by human-generated trash and garbage bags that evoke images of crows struggling to survive in a polluted city.

Even though the other homeless men blame Simon for killing the deer, Treuer leaves it unclear whether or not Simon’s desire to touch the deer makes him culpable for its gruesome death. From the start of the novel, Treuer presents the complexities of environmental violence, emphasizing that in order to consider fairly the causes and effects of such violence, one must have a firm grasp of the context out of which such violence is born. Simon’s own long-term suffering and grief, triggered by the disproportionate number of human losses he has experienced living in a part of town where death is common, along with a loss of connection to Native land and culture through dislocation, prompt him to reach out to feel the warmth of the deer. When the

deer dies, rather than simply brushing that death off, Simon grieves once more, as he is the last to leave the site of the deer's death, and as he does so, he walks slowly with "his face hidden in the folds of his jacket" (5). While Treuer suggests that there is a larger context to be considered when judging who is responsible for the deer's death, his description of the deer's body being flung loftily among speeding cars nevertheless evokes feelings of disgust and sadness. He wants the reader to notice that, in the words of Barry Lopez, we wrongly "treat the attrition of lives on the road like the attrition of lives in war: horrifying, unavoidable, justified" (*Apologia* 16). Yet by offering Simon's perspective alongside the gruesome details of the deer's seemingly preventable death, he also introduces the idea of multiple, parallel environmental injustices that must be looked at together with attention to important cultural and racial differences.

Treuer contrasts two distinct groups of people affected by uneven urban development in Minneapolis. One group lives in the suburbs, presumably white, and the other consists of communities of color living in the inner city and Southside, including Native Americans who were enticed there during Relocation. He describes the privileged white people who ponder over what they will do later in the day as they "ease," "coast," and "roll" into the city from their comfortable suburban neighborhoods to go to work:

There are always errands to run after work, to the hardware store to price siding or to buy another rattling package of D-Con for the mice that winter in the walls, nesting in the newspaper left there as insulation by the first owners who didn't have enough money to buy rock wool. It is of these things they think as they near the rutted apartments of South Minneapolis, not of the people who live in the faded glory of the Windsor, in the

redbrick town houses on Portland, rat-holed, and broken-into cells where children sleep on the floor. If they do look up from the thin space between the steering wheel and the visor, they don't notice much but once in a while the Pillsbury Mansion strikes them as strange, misplaced, out of step with the rest of the neighborhood, set there by a strong force of nature.

(33-4)

This “strong force of nature” is the greed of corporations and government that sought to reinvent Minneapolis by gutting one-third of the downtown between 1957 and 1965. *The Hiawatha* sharply contrasts the white suburban homeowners with poor people of color living in the city, many of whom have been displaced by urban development and forced to live on the streets, such as Simon's friend T-man who lives in an encampment near the river and the homeless people who get their meals at the church.¹³⁶ Other characters are not far from homelessness, including Simon's mother, Betty, who at the end of the novel is forced to move out of her “house without a number” back to the reservation to live in a trailer. Simon and One-Two also live in transitory places, including jail and hotels.¹³⁷ These examples of dislocation are representative of the actual disproportionate numbers of homeless people of color living in cities across the U.S., who are negatively impacted by racist, unsustainable environmental development and planning.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ See Kasinitz's article and N. Smith, 27-8, for research that explains this correlation between urban renewal and homelessness.

¹³⁷ In Minneapolis during the 1960s, Indians made up 10% of the city's population, but 70% of the city's jail inmates (Cohen).

¹³⁸ In 2006, for example, the U.S. Conference of Mayors reported that 69% of homeless people living in major cities nationwide were persons of color, a highly disproportionate number since persons of color made up less than 34% of the country's total population (U.S. 2006 Census).

Simon's story of struggle against environmental injustices parallels the history of cyclic destruction and renewal in Minneapolis, beginning with the death of his father, which Simon witnessed as a child. A tree feller in the logging business, Simon's father unwittingly participates in the work of destroying his own home, the Ojibwe reservation. As a result of this violent work—which both involves the actual killing of trees and requires dangerous labor—he is killed when one day a tree he cuts accidentally falls on him. His death is literal, but also figurative. It represents the general devastation caused by corporate development on Native lands and the long-term effects it has on his family, confirming and continuing the historical trauma suffered by Indians in the U.S. since colonization. What is more, it evokes and substantiates the old adage, “If a tree falls in the forest...,” pointing to the fact that environmental injustices often go unnoticed, because the problems are covered up, ignored, or obscured by those in power—that is, not “heard” or “seen” by them.

This pattern of environmental violence continues when Betty moves her family from the Ojibwe reservation to Minneapolis in 1961, as part of the U.S. Relocation program. Let down by the BIA's false promise to provide adequate housing and employment upon relocation, she struggles to make ends meet in a new urban environment. Consequently, she faces many of the same environmental injustices she experienced living on the reservation in extreme poverty:¹³⁹

Like a blundering forgetful child, once the [BIA] decided on relocation as a method for dealing with the ‘Indian Problem’ and sent representatives to

¹³⁹ According to a 2010 United Nations report on global poverty, “Native Americans in the United States suffer poverty at a rate three times higher than that of the non-Hispanic white population” (United Nations 72).

the reservations with beautiful brochures of San Diego, Chicago, and Minneapolis, it promptly forgot about the program. While the states and private corporations eyed the northern forests and western mineral deposits, as available and temporary as carnival dolls, the government forgot the Indians in the cities. . . . They forgot their promises of clean running water, of electricity, of sound roofing and roads, just as they would forget the Vista volunteers up north in the sixties, stranded on the reservation without any resources or much in the way of a purpose, strange white fish washed up on the shores of difference. (62-3)

During the first few months, Betty sleeps with her four children on the floor of her cousin's damp Southside apartment. Before winter encroaches, she signs a lease on the "no-numbered house at the corner of Third Avenue and Franklin" in the center of Southside Minneapolis, a neighborhood well known for its racial diversity and economic poverty (63). Yet Betty is forced to have sex with the new landlord to protect her family from eviction. Despite the sacrifices she makes to pay rent and, later, Simon's financial contribution through high steel work, Betty must eventually return to the poverty-ridden reservation when her home is confiscated by a development company for the placement of "a gas station or some such" (54). Her situation offers a clear example of the violation of the Principles of Environmental Justice, since she is repeatedly displaced and also denied the right to a safe and healthy living environment; for the Principles recognize that "home" is not just a physical space providing shelter, but also a place that is linked to cultural and spiritual survival.

When Simon gains knowledge of his mother's sexual payment to the landlord, he is determined to find a job in high steel construction to cover the rent, despite the life-threatening nature of the work. He explains to Betty his desire to work in high steel by calling it "good work," to which she replies, "Yeah. Your daddy had good work too, and it ended him up under a tree" (71). Like his father, and in fact similar to his mother, Simon ends up taking a job in which he risks his life daily for the profit of white corporate owners.¹⁴⁰ Both jobs for Native Americans are examples of environmental job blackmail since they discriminatorily place underprivileged people in the position of having to choose between unemployment or dangerous work in order to provide a basic quality of life for themselves and their families.¹⁴¹ Robert Bullard explains that "[w]orkers of color are especially vulnerable to job blackmail because of the greater threat of unemployment they face compared to whites and because of their concentration in low-paying, unskilled, nonunionized occupations" ("Anatomy" 23). Additionally, Native American high steel construction workers, like Native loggers, are forced to participate in a line of work that generally supports the exploitation of indigenous lands—for both acreage and raw materials—in exchange for "progress" symbolized by powerful financial centers literally housed in skyscrapers. Paralleling the logging business, the construction of skyscrapers completes the cycle of destruction and renewal. As the trees come down, buildings go up.

¹⁴⁰ While Betty is not employed as a sex worker, her extreme poverty—which is tied to her gender and race—forces her to engage in dangerous sex acts in exchange for a place for her family to live.

¹⁴¹ See Bullard's Introduction to his edited volume *Confronting Environmental Racism* and Kazis and Grossman's *Fear at Work*, Chapter One, for more on the concept of environmental job blackmail.

High steel construction, including work on bridges and skyscrapers, has a long history that began nearly a half-century before Simon joined the construction crew in Minneapolis. Although only a small percentage of high steel workers were Indian, the percentage of Indian people doing steel work was disproportionate to that of other groups (Rasenberger 161). For a population that suffered devastating poverty on the reservations, the work in high steel, though dangerous, was enticing for its pay, which was only slightly better than other jobs for unskilled workers. Indians came to the work as a result of environmental job blackmail and continued to be recruited by construction companies in cities across the U.S. into the late 20th century.¹⁴² Articles and essays written about Indian “skywalkers” by white journalists in the first half of the century presented an image of Indians as having an inherent, animalistic fearlessness of heights, a racist misconception that held fast throughout the 20th century. Joseph Mitchell, in his 1949 story for the *New Yorker*, for example, describes the Indians as “agile as goats” and “natural-born bridgemen” (274). In his descriptions of the Indian high-steel workers

¹⁴² In one of the most famous tragedies in high steel work, 96 men were killed in 1907 during the construction of the Quebec Bridge, 35 of them Kahnawake Indians. After this disaster, the tribe decided that the men would stop working jobs in large groups (Rasenberger 158). This began the era of “booming out,” when small groups of Indian men from the Kahnawake reservation and neighboring tribes would travel across the country for work on high steel projects. With their sudden dispersal into developing cities across America, Indians made their name in this dangerous line of work. This is contrary to Joseph Mitchell’s rendering of the Indians as “erratically” moving from city to city in order to “seek rush jobs that offer unlimited overtime work at double pay” (279-80).

Treuer confronts these racist stereotypes, yet in doing so he acknowledges that these stereotypes of urban Indians persist today, over sixty years later.¹⁴³

[T]hey knew that they could not argue with gravity. The earth would treat them with the same indifference as loose steel, a dropped hammer, a windblown lunch. This was the secret: the building wanted to stay standing, to grow, to sway but hold on, and so did they. The IDS Tower wanted to be noticed and admired, as did the Indian crew. (79)

While Treuer suggests here that the desire for recognition and a will to survive were factors in keeping Indians in the high steel profession, he also calls the reader's attention to the arbitrary imbalance of power between the Indian crew and those who designed the Tower by pointing out that despite their differences, they want the same thing: to be noticed and admired. In comparing the buildings and the Indian workers, he underscores that they are equally expendable resources in a growing economy and the fact that Indians continue to be dehumanized. The patriarchal, capitalist, white power symbolized by the phallic IDS Tower is in reality not a fair match for a group of people who have been fighting to "stay standing" through centuries of ecocide and genocide. When asked whether Indians are genetically unafraid of heights or just able to keep good balance, Simon replies, "Fuck no. We just don't care if we fall" (131). This "not caring" attitude is not one of defeat. Rather, it reveals that for Simon survival isn't about living in fear of

¹⁴³ Treuer's *The Hiawatha* is one of the only accounts, fictional or non-fictional, of the legacy of high steel Indian workers. A handful of books on the high steel workers exist, including Jim Rasenberger's historical study *High Steel*, Joseph Mitchell's short journalistic story, Maurice Kenny's poems in the collection *Genocide of the Mind*, and children's fictional books by David Weitzman and Connie Ann Kirk. PBS featured a documentary, *To Brooklyn and Back*, on the Mohawk Indians, with a special emphasis on the role of women. See also Don Owen's documentary *High Steel*.

dying, but taking risks that might carry one out of the inevitable cycle of environmental injustice that Indians have faced for hundreds of years.

The novel also makes clear that Indians on the job were treated discriminatorily compared to non-Indian workers:

They sent the Indian crew skyward at noon. The other crews took the dawn and dusk shifts, when the wind was stilled in the absence of asphalt heat sent up from below like blasts from a large wing. They were allowed in the union because no one else wanted their jobs, or the shifts they kept. . . . The Indians worked the longest shifts during the summer swelter and the winter freeze. They were assigned the most extreme parts of the frame. (78-9)

In addition to the very real possibility of falling off of one of the high beams, all construction workers incurred daily aches and pain due to heavy manual labor, yet due to unreasonably long hours, extreme weather conditions, and limited access to other work or healthcare, these minor injuries inflicted a heavier toll on Indian workers than on their white counterparts. Before his fall, which permanently damages his back and forces him out of work, One-Two is described as enduring the physical stress of lifting heavy metal beams at life-defying heights: “His legs cramped from crouching on the steel timbers, his back pinched from balancing on girders all day, his hands laced with splinters of metal that were invisible until marked with rubies of welling blood” (81). The nature of high steel work is not ambiguously dangerous; it is literally life-threatening, debilitating work that targeted Indians specifically. In this line of work, Native American laborers become just as expendable as the soil, water, air, plants and animals that are poisoned and

displaced by the intrusive buildings and industry together with the naturally sourced materials used to construct the skyscrapers.

The environmental injustices of high steel work depicted in *The Hiawatha* also extend to the people who live in the community since the demolition of buildings, the first part of most urban renewal projects, causes dangerous air pollution that disproportionately affects women, children, and people of color living in areas undergoing urban renewal projects. Treuer depicts Simon's family, led by One-Two, observing the demolition of the Metropolitan Building, a real-life event for which people gathered in attendance: "There was a quiet abandon with which the city built and rebuilt itself . . . It all seemed impossible. Even as they watched it happen, it was ludicrous that the mass of steel and glass, New Hampshire granite and Superior sandstone, that had dominated the south city skyline would be gone" (57). One-Two is careful to keep the children a certain distance from the site, and yet the impact of the demolition is not felt or experienced immediately. Much later, "[t]he children will remember mostly the sound and the dust, the incredible soft, lazy dust" (58). To the reader's surprise, Treuer goes on to explain that the destruction would take a year. "The progress of destruction was slow." The oxymoron of "progress" and "destruction" is illuminated in this phrase that is broodingly repeated multiple times throughout the passage. Since the process is subtle and slow, the narrator's emphasis on the negative impact on children points to the unseen long-term effects of the dust that, if "lazed down over the . . . quiet street," must also be softly settled in their lungs, over time. By describing the sound of demolition as "the bone-deep crunch of stone," Treuer suggests that the sound sinks deeper than the eardrums to rattle the insides of people, in other words, that the particle matter causes

asthma, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.¹⁴⁴ Significantly, Simon identifies with the violence perpetrated by the massive cranes, an “architectural death” that would foreshadow the deaths of his own brother and nephew (59). “Simon watched with a sense of license, that in the city there were times when you could do damage, when you were encouraged to rip something apart” (58). Witnessing the city participate in this violent cycle of destruction and renewal, he is unable to separate the violence done to him and the earth from the violence he wants to enact.

Nearly all historical studies and narratives about Minneapolis’s urban revitalization project of the 1960s and 70s fail to address the price that is paid for this project by the construction workers and the dislocated and poisoned (by particle matter fallout and pollution) residents who were predominantly people of color. Instead, they focus on the technical and economic challenges of gutting a city and rebuilding it from the perspective of planners and investors. In contrast, in *The Hiawatha*, Treuer focuses directly on the “hidden [environmental] tragedies” of such disadvantaged people of color: “Looking back, holding the colorized photograph of this monument [of the IDS Tower], the hidden tragedies of these nameless people have gone and will continue to go, unnoticed” (298). The racial politics behind the building of this tower are made especially clear in Simon’s description of the IDS Tower once its construction is complete:

“You know what this’ll look like when we’re done? All sided in glass, a huge lobby four stories high. The floor laid out in marble. Sixty-thousand fuckin square feet of marble. And it’ll be theirs. It’ll all be theirs.

¹⁴⁴ For supporting data, see Ming-Ho Yu, et al., p. 143.

They'll have some black man in a uniform at the desk. And they'll tell him not to let me in. They'll tell him to ask me my business." (130)

What goes unspoken but understood here is who the "they" is in his narrative.

Distinguished from himself, an Indian, and the concierge/doorman, who is black, the people to whom the building will belong are white patrons and white owners who have in the U.S. historically held social and economic power through colonization and institutionalized racism.

Treuer describes how newly erected buildings in Minneapolis, which included the Nicollet Mall in 1968 and IDS Center in 1974, fostered the city's idea of "progress and development":¹⁴⁵

For the first time the [Twin] Cities could boast about something they had created, not simply that they were kings of lumber, grain, and taconite— . . . For the first time the Cities were creating something unseen elsewhere in the world . . . congratulating themselves on progress and development. (296-7)

Yet as Peter bluecloud's dream of Alcatraz and Louise Erdrich's depiction of the old Indian trading village of Gakahbeking revealed earlier in this chapter, the cities were built through Indian labor on what was once Indian land. Further, such cities have a grossly disproportionate "ecological footprint" that contributes to global warming and resource depletion.¹⁴⁶ Skyscrapers such as those featured in *The Hiawatha* have dramatic

¹⁴⁵ At the time it was built, the IDS building towered over the previous highest building, the Foshay Tower.

¹⁴⁶ Willam Rees defines the "ecological footprint of cities" as "the land required to supply them with food and timber products, and to absorb their CO₂ output via areas of growing vegetation" (qtd. in Girardet 19). Herbert Girardet analyzes the ecological footprint of

environmental impact.¹⁴⁷ Their construction relies on the exploitation of poor people and land in economically disadvantaged regions for cheap labor and raw materials. Such colossal buildings also consume vast amounts of energy and produce high volumes of waste, as well as block airflow that in effect concentrates pollution in areas where impoverished communities of color live. All of this damage exists in addition to the fact that buildings directly harm the plots of earth on which they stand:

Each building is an act against nature; it directly makes some proportion of the Earth's surface organically sterile by covering it over, rendering that area of soil incapable of producing those natural resources that require the interaction between soil, sun and water. As a result, in ecological terms, a building is a parasite. (Curwell and Cooper 24)

Buildings such as the IDS Tower depicted in Treuer's fiction are also *economic* parasites, since financial resources that fund global environmental projects are controlled within their insular walls. Government- and corporate-sponsored development projects that use people of color like Simon and One-Two as a cheap, dispensable labor source in the construction of ecologically unsustainable buildings participate in toxic colonialism, which Greenpeace defines as the "subjugation of people to an ecologically destructive economic order by entities over which the people have no control" (qtd. in Bullard 19).

London, "the city that started it all": "[In 2000,] London's total footprint . . . extends to around 125 times its surface area of 159,000 hectares . . . With 12 per cent of Britain's population, London requires the equivalent of Britain's entire productive land. In reality, this land, of course, stretches to far-flung places such as the wheat prairies of Kansas, the tea gardens of Assam, the forests of Scandinavia and Amazonia, and the copper mines of Zambia" (19).

¹⁴⁷ Only in the 21st century have architects such as Kenneth Yeang begun to theorize and design "green" skyscrapers that address a number of the unjust and unsustainable qualities described here. See Yeang's *The Green Skyscraper*.

Toxic colonialism is also defined more broadly as the use of ecologically destructive forces to conquer a people and their land, and includes the vast expansion of U.S. railroads in the 19th century which devastated Indian lands and is referenced throughout Treuer's novel, starting with its title. "The Hiawatha" passenger train traveled through Minneapolis, connecting Chicago and the Twin Cities. The original train takes its name from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, a poem now widely recognized as a work with racist origins that romanticizes Indians, particularly through the stereotypical image of the "noble savage." Through this reference to Longfellow's famous poem, the Hiawatha train also represents the appropriation of Indian culture for white consumption, mirroring the actual displacement of Native communities and destruction of Native lands as a result of the American railroad industry. Significantly, the Hiawatha train, featured in the novel as an abandoned train awaiting demolition, is where Simon's nephew, Lincoln, is conceived, and it is also connected to the railroad where Simon's sister, Irma, is killed in a car collision. The train, then, symbolizes the tragic outcomes of the railroad industry that historically disregarded environmental impact and the construction of which relied on the labor of people of color and poor whites. What is more, the train both literally and figuratively links seemingly disparate sites of environmental injustices, including, for example, coalmines and industrial factories. Through its many references to trains and railroads, *The Hiawatha* ties together past and present hazardous working conditions for Indians, who were recruited to work on the railroads in the early part of the 20th century and later, as exemplified by Simon

and One-Two, hired in disproportionate numbers to build the cities that would emerge as a result of industrialized transportation.¹⁴⁸

Since the time of Simon's story, the struggle for environmental justice in Minneapolis continues. A 1999 report on brownfields¹⁴⁹ assessments in Minneapolis by the EPA states: "Formerly a preferred location for heavy industry,¹⁵⁰ the urban core of Minneapolis has declined because of the movement of industry to the suburbs. More than half of the residents are African-American, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Hispanic. Minneapolis has one of the highest concentrations of poverty of any metropolitan area in the country."¹⁵¹ While Minneapolis still struggles to achieve environmental justice for its residents, Native communities there continue to fight for their rights to land, clean air and water, housing, and fair working conditions.¹⁵² Urban Indian communities continue to grow, and we can view the changes in urban Indian communities as adaptation, rather than assimilation, as Jeanne Guillemin explains: "No group is capable of a perfect functionalism: yet when a people survives over generations, the first questions asked should be about continuity, not discontinuity." (67). Guillemin

¹⁴⁸ Simon Ortiz, discussed earlier in this chapter, writes about his father's work on the railroads in poetry and prose in *Woven Stone*.

¹⁴⁹ Brownfields are government designated contaminated development sites due to polluting industries.

¹⁵⁰ This refers to the city both at the turn of the century when it was a mill town, and again in the 1970s during the urban renewal project.

¹⁵¹ See the US EPA's report, "Brownfields Job Training and Development Demonstration Pilot, Hennepin County, MN."

¹⁵² See reports by the Environmental Justice Advocates of Minnesota and by the Council on Crime and Justice.

also insists that cultural diversity must be considered in discussions of urban poverty. In other words, there is not a “universality of an urban Culture of Poverty” (73).¹⁵³

Native communities are resilient and willing to change for the sake of survival: “As Indian people often explain it, the community itself has the potential for regeneration. The community is ephemeral in nature, as Coyote has taught people to appreciate, with the power to continually take new forms and thus endure. Or it is described as being like the old-time warrior’s strategy to disperse, vanish, become invisible, and then to regroup to fight again another day. This dynamic is a familiar one to Indian people, who throughout the history of Indian-White relations and before have sought ways to persist as individuals and as peoples. The institutions in the Indian community are in continual flux, able to disassemble and reassemble. Yet through all of this motion, there is an underlying network structure that allows for persistence” (Lobo 77-8). Literature participates in this network structure, perpetuating the circulation and dissemination of stories that preserve forgotten histories and transform stories of injustice into acts of resistance.

Treuer emphasizes the danger of historical amnesia at the very end of the novel in describing Simon’s hidden, or forgotten, tragedies: “But the ground on which he runs will hold no print . . . You will be forgotten. Your feet, your hands are not words and cannot speak. . . . the body remembering instead of the mind—it is of no use” (310). Treuer shifts from third-person narrative to second-person, in effect asking the reader to consider her or his own position within the narrative. Here Treuer seems to be saying that even though the landscape continually changes, repeatedly erasing your “print”—and for

¹⁵³ Guillemin looks specifically at Micmac Indians of the Boston area. She discusses tribal organization within urban American society.

Simon his print resides in his legacy of high steel work—the body remembers. Treuer states that “it is of no use.” And yet these words come at the end of his novel which, as a whole, does the crucial work of memorializing high steel workers like Simon. Treuer has imprinted their sacrifices in my heart and mind, helping me to see that the fight to save our planet begins with the fight for environmental justice.

In her edited book that would help pave the way for the field of ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty writes that environmental concerns “seep into” our arts and literatures.¹⁵⁴ She believes that ultimately all stories deal at some level with concerns that are land-based. I suggest that environmental concerns do not merely seep into our arts and literatures but also *inspire* and *construct* them, especially since environmental concerns are always inextricably tied to issues of race, class, and gender. For many writers of color in the United States, the act of storytelling is the act of working through trauma and of empowering an underrepresented community. Ojibwa literary critic Kimberly M. Blaeser declares: “Not writing black and white, red and white, up and down, rich and poor, good and bad, spirit and flesh. Not writing either/or because sometimes the real truth is either/and, both/and. Not writing sense. Writing reality. Not writing literature. Writing revolution. Not writing literature. Writing life” (271). Here she explains that literature is synonymous with life. And so Simon Ortiz’s traveling Indians, Louise Erdrich’s homeless city residents, and David Treuer’s high steel workers are all real. They transform our understanding about the interdependence of human justice and earth sustainability.

¹⁵⁴ Glotfelty, “Introduction.”

AFTERWORD

Ecocriticism as Theory in the Flesh: Literary Criticism, Pedagogy, and Activism

According to Patrick D. Murphy, ecocriticism is necessarily an activist approach to literature.¹⁵⁵ He states, “However one goes about teaching and analyzing nature-oriented literature, it inevitably involves challenging students to bring to consciousness their views about the world, their sense of personal responsibility in that world, and to consider the impact of contemporary society on the environments in which everyone lives and dies.” I agree that the study of environmental literature today lends itself to introspection (and hopefully action), especially since environmentalism has become so pervasive in contemporary popular culture and thus increasingly relevant to our daily lives. However, teaching that “inevitably” arrives at greater environmental consciousness is not enough. In fact, *it matters greatly how* “one goes about teaching and analyzing nature-oriented literature.” As educators we have a responsibility to provide for students deliberate and principled guidance that will inspire in them socially-just civic involvement on environmental issues. As Jia-Yi Cheng Levine argues, “Teaching is more than transmitting knowledge or modes of thinking: it helps form political subjects who will determine the future of this planet we call home” (368).

Antiracist ecocriticism breaks down the complexities of environmental crisis by drawing distinct connections between issues of human justice and environmental degradation. By engaging the critical imagination and mapping out various environmentally-related issues in a piece of literature, literary analysis makes the

¹⁵⁵ I take the term in my title from Cherríe Moraga, “Theory in the Flesh.”

extremely overwhelming problem of environmental devastation comprehensible. Still, the topics of unimaginable human injustices and ecological ruin can bring on feelings of depression and powerlessness that stand in the way of needed action. Hope and empowerment, then, must be the final goal of teaching environmental literature if we want to see a future for life as we know it on planet earth.

As Elizabeth Ammons writes, “The struggle of justice against oppression, hope against despair, is hard. But it has long been the work of humanists, and of literature in particular, to put before the world *both* terms in each of those dyads—justice as well as oppression, hope as well as despair—to help people commit to the first in each case” (172). The literary texts I have presented in this dissertation illuminate a wide range of environmental injustices and ecological perspectives so that we might continue in the struggle for what is morally right. The labor activist poetry of Gary Soto and Mark Nowak, Jayne Cortez’s “Talking About New Orleans,” Meena Alexander’s “Great Brown River,” Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, Garrett Hongo’s poem about coolie laborers in Hawaii, María Cristina Mena’s feminist and antiracist short stories, Simon Ortiz’s poetry about traveling Indians and community formation, Peter bluecloud’s depictions of an Indian reclaimed Alcatraz, Louise Erdrich’s *The Antelope Wife*, and David Treuer’s *The Hiawatha* all detail painful environmental histories and contemporary earth-based struggles for underprivileged populations in the U.S. Yet each does so by participating in the act of remembering, delineating various lines of oppression for specific groups, offering radical and diverse solutions to achieving ecological balance and environmental justice, stimulating our imaginations, and moving our hearts toward change.

Our pedagogies must follow in this literary activist tradition by encouraging enthusiastic participation in education over passive consumption in order to, as bell hooks eloquently states, “connect the will to know with the will to become” (*Teaching to Transgress* 19). This means moving beyond mere intellectual exchange in our classrooms to engage simultaneously the mind, body, and hearts of our students. It means encouraging independent critical thinking and class participation as much as possible, while at the same time exposing students to a vast resource of materials offering diverse perspectives—film, literature, art, critical theory by white women and people of color—which support risk-taking and provoke new perspectives in class discussion and student work. These diverse, inclusive materials will also inevitably invite a diverse range of students to participate in the discussion. An antiracist ecocriticism falls perfectly into this pedagogical approach since it calls for a wider, more inclusive range of literatures and theories that accurately and fairly reflect society’s diversity. Such conscientious criticism would, as Scott Slovic suggests, have a “ripple-effect,” where “scholarship will affect what teachers do in their classrooms, which will in turn reach broad groups of students, who will in turn become teachers themselves or move out into the world and carry with them faint hints of the ideas represented here” (x). Finally, it is extremely important to build into our ecocritical syllabi opportunities for students to take action and ways for them to process information in relation to their own personal histories and daily lives.

In my own classroom, for example, I incorporate activities that empower students to act in the face of environmental and social adversity. I have assigned students a project in which they, in small groups, plan and host an event on campus which incorporates literature, film, or art in order to educate peers (and faculty) about a particular

environmental issue or set of issues. One group hosted a night of cooking and sharing apple-crumble while reading food-related poetry and generating their own recipes which they analyzed as a corporate cultural text. In response to that literary-cooking event, a student wrote in her weekly journal: “As we put into practice that evening, food is a means of uniting and bringing people physically together around a table. In that space, beautiful thoughts and new knowledge can be shared, and the power for change can be built.”

Another student explained the challenges and rewards of connecting her personal life to the literature we read in class: “I am reading Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and up till now have been denying its strong connection to myself. I find the discussion of scientific fact interesting and respect its rhetorical goal of influencing ‘public change and corporate policies’ . . . However, I have yet to consider the fact that my mother [who was recently diagnosed with breast cancer] grew up in California when Carson was writing. These scientific facts, which I [at first] approached with such cleanliness and intellectual thought, [actually] turned my life and my relationship to my mother upside down.” For this student, the moments when Carson’s text moved away from scientific and political rhetoric, read in class alongside other short stories about gender, cancer, and environmental toxins, “made [her] heart sink” as she realized for the first time that her mother’s cancer did not just happen, but was the specific result of environmental injustices that have long targeted women. She ends with the declaration: “I am a feminist and so is [my mother]. . . Seeing the impacts of the violence on my mother’s body has made me understand the vulnerability of life and the sheer destructive nature of seemingly common injustices.” The literature that we as ecocritics teach about in the

classroom and analyze in our scholarship is directly relevant to our students' everyday lives—as well as our own—and must be taught as such.

By grounding literature and theory in the material reality of simultaneous ecological and human devastation specific to U.S. racial, economic, and gender minority groups, an antiracist ecocriticism can be considered what Cherríe Moraga calls “a theory in the flesh,” meaning “one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (23). The work of every ecocritic emerges from the physical realities of her/his life. Only when we recognize and embrace this fact will it be possible to influence change so that these physical realities—race, gender, economic status, sexuality, age, geographic location—no longer determine whether or not we live in a safe and healthy environment and whether or not our children will inherit an earth that sustains them.

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