

Editorial Essay

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

