

# Introduction

## *Environmental Justice at the Crossroads of Danger and Freedom*

Stevie Wonder's 1975 "Saturn," from the epic *Songs from the Key of Life*, offers a lyrical utopia. Wonder penned the song as an ode to his birthplace (Saginaw), which his collaborator misheard as "Saturn." The song is a loving testament to where Wonder came from and where he wants to go, a vision of a future world much better than the one we inhabit. Unclean air, violence, war, and consumerism are wrapped into an extraterrestrial longing. Four decades later, Wonder's lyrical call is both more urgent and ever distant. In a nation where rapacious corporate capitalism is plundering natural resources, and oil and gas interests fund climate change denial and direct what passes for environmental policy, a world with clean air and without war, rampant consumerism, and extractive capitalism seems nearly impossible to imagine. It is precisely now that imagination and action become essential.

We are living at a precarious moment, with the warmest years ever measured, active assaults on both the disenfranchised and institutions that serve the public interest, and global inequality at its zenith. This moment demands an analysis through the

crossroads, an “important structuring metaphor in American Studies,” taken from the story that bluesman Robert Johnson cut his deal with the devil down at the crossroads, trading his soul for genius.<sup>1</sup> We are now at a new, yet familiar crossroads and a moment of danger.<sup>2</sup> Neoliberalism idealizes markets, capital, consumer subjectivities, and values over communitarian notions of belonging or justice. We have lived (and died) under neoliberalism for decades, but under changing conditions. The valorization of privatization, finance, and the market and the retrenchment of the state and public sectors are both dominant *and* under stress. As one scholar writes, “The present economic crisis is a moment of potential rupture,” because prevailing regimes of “power, profit and privilege” are under serious pressure.<sup>3</sup>

Anti-immigrant sentiments, nationalist populist authoritarianism, militarized security discourses, racist policies, regressive gender politics, and climate change denial (or hostility) are linked, whether in the United States, Italy, India, Hungary, the Philippines, Brazil, Israel, or Poland. Awareness of environmental and other injustices, in the form of vibrant global social movements, is also on the rise because of social media. Although the global economic system is ever more integrated under neoliberalism, hostility to immigrants and refugees is high. Economic inequality has reached levels never seen before in any period of human history. The three richest people in the United States (Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffet, and Bill Gates) own as much wealth as the bottom half of the population (160 million people).<sup>4</sup> In 2013, the world’s eighty-five richest people had a net worth equal to that of 50 percent of the planet’s population (3,5 billion people).<sup>5</sup> In 2017, the wealthiest global 1 percent gained 82 percent of the world’s wealth.<sup>6</sup> It was also the third warmest year on record.<sup>7</sup> Interwoven are crises of modernity (including declining faith in technical authority

and scientific knowledge), attacks on media institutions, and the winding down of the American century (albeit with bellicose American exceptionalism denying its demise though red hats and Make America Great Again—MAGA—slogans).

This book begins with an observation: those on the environmental justice front lines have been living, dying, and fighting for a long time. The resurgence of explicit racism is unsurprising for justice activists, who see their lives impacted by legacies of structural domination and racist public policies. Social movements for environmental and climate justice are mobilizing large numbers of people (including virtually) and having a broad national and global impact outside of local contexts. Oil pipeline protests on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation; responses to mass lead poisonings in Flint, Michigan; mobilizations against police killings of African Americans and other people of color; impassioned actions of Indigenous and small island populations in opposition to climate change—all comprise a snapshot of the hundreds of protests in the United States that have foregrounded the convergence between environmentalism and movements to combat social injustice and inequality. Environmental justice activists make common cause across the globe and mourn the victims of environmental violence and assassination, land defenders like Berta Cáceres in Honduras, Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria, and Chico Mendes in Brazil, who all lost their lives in the struggle against dams and oil and forestry interests. Internationally, extrajudicial killings of those who oppose economic development and deforestation have accelerated, with the death rate rising in the last four years to an average of two activists a week.<sup>8</sup>

The central questions I explore here are based on intensifying social, political, economic, and environmental injustices and

responses to these conflicts framed around these questions: What crossroads and moment are we in now? What can we learn from struggles for environmental justice in our moment of danger? My starting point is simple: environmental justice movements—what they are, who is involved, and what they are fighting against and for—help us understand historical and cultural forces and resistance to violence, death, and destruction of lives and bodies through movements, cultures, and stories.

It is precisely in this moment that understanding environmental justice movements is essential. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin writes that to articulate the past does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was,” but to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”<sup>9</sup> This book is about the seizing hold of the significance of environmental justice movements. The moment of crisis is the moment of rupture: dominant belief systems and ideologies that dispute them come into view, or sharper relief.

My focus here is on environmental justice movements and the cultures and analytics they advance and embody. These social movements offer important guideposts for troubled times, because they and the people who make them have long-standing political commitments and have done important ideological work grounded in everyday and long-lasting struggles for justice. Starting from the premise that environmental damages are interwoven with political and social conflicts, this book examines how organizers, communities, and movements fight, survive, love, and create in the face of environmental and social violence that challenges the very conditions of life itself.

This book offers a synthesis of environmental justice from a distinctly American Studies perspective, looking at Standing Rock; Flint; Hurricanes Katrina and Maria; Kivalina, Alaska;

and the Central Valley of California. It spotlights how diverse peoples and communities invoke history and justice in facing environmental problems and their roots, in an interdisciplinary and comparative way. Several shifts have made the integration between environmental justice and American Studies obvious. Environmental justice connects race, class, indigeneity, gender, and environmentalism and fundamentally involves social justice. The expanding resonance of the environmental justice movement framework is a concrete response to intensifying and interconnected conditions of pollution and inequality.

Environmental justice scholars and organizers have for well over three decades articulated how race, indigeneity, poverty, and environmental inequality are linked in a toxic brew. Environmental justice is focused on intersectionality (race, class, gender, immigration/refugees, Indigenous land claims/territorial sovereignty) and organized around expanding social and racial justice in environmental terms (land, pollution, health).<sup>10</sup> Contemporary environmental justice struggles in the United States exist within histories of mainstream environmentalism, the civil rights movement, and global resource exploitation inflected through race and racism, colonialism, and xenophobia. After the 1991 “Principles of Environmental Justice,” U.S.-based environmental justice movement leaders followed up with the 2002 “Principles of Working Together,” guided by the central tenet that “we need each other and we are stronger with each other.”<sup>11</sup>

Environmental justice was, and remains, about expansion, connection, and change, governed by this belief in mutuality. That perspective matters now more than ever, as communities face hydra-headed assaults—attacks on immigrants and refugees, rollbacks of LGBTQ and abortion rights, increases in voter suppression and broader retrenchment from the gains of

social movements in gender, environmentalism, and civil rights in shaping public policies and discourses. What we call movements matters.<sup>12</sup> Naming problems as environmental racism, inequality, inequity, or injustice has different philosophical and political stakes and distinctly positions the roots and solutions. “Environmental justice” has grown broader and more salient over time, even as what justice means has been vigorously debated by scholars and expanded by activists.<sup>13</sup> The field is ever evolving, but some observations are clear:

Environmental justice is a compelling umbrella concept. Most versions and visions of environmental justice focus on some component of power and powerlessness, including but not limited to categories of race, class, gender, citizenship/nation-state, indigeneity, and sexuality.

It is easier to recognize the symptoms and examples of environmental injustice, inequality, and racism than to clarify the roots and name the causes.

Environmental justice has evolved to connect closely with climate justice.<sup>14</sup>

The debate and expansion about what environmental justice means is the central point.<sup>15</sup> I use *justice* in a capacious sense, although my notion is drawn particularly from feminist and antiracist accounts. Environmental justice is always already at the crossroads.<sup>16</sup> Rather than fix a meaning in time or space, the process and politics of meaning-making is what makes environmental justice continually relevant. But meaning-making and expansion without a clear sense of politics and position is dangerous. To wit, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under President Bush Jr. took away any mention of race and income in environmental justice policy-making to declare that

environmental justice was for everyone, even as federal environmental policy turned ever more squarely in the direction of gas and oil interests.

Thus, to be clear, my starting premise is that unjust environments are rooted in racism, capitalism, militarism, colonialism, land theft from Native peoples, and gender violence. The status quo is too deeply invested in the institutional forces and ideological structures that exacerbate already existing conditions of environmental and social injustice. Tom Goldtooth (Diné/Dakota), executive director of the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), says, “The system ain’t broke. It was built to be this way.”<sup>17</sup>

Environmental violence is built into the history of the United States. It is not an aberration, but part and parcel of a political-economic system based on racialized extraction of land and labor, including from Indigenous peoples. Capitalism depends on control, specifically control of nature.<sup>18</sup> It also relies on the control and abuse of people of color. Environmental scholar Malini Ranganathan argues that Flint, where the government lead-poisoned residents, is not an “American water tragedy.” Rather, government-sanctioned lead poisoning is an example of racialized dispossession, inextricable from the working of liberalism and processes of “property making and property taking.” Liberalism relies on the “moral primacy of individual freedoms, especially the freedom to own property.”<sup>19</sup> The alienation and dispossession from the land that settler colonialism demands is linked to the alienation of African Americans in an economic and cultural system that political theorist Cedric Robinson calls “racial capitalism.”<sup>20</sup> Historian Patrick Wolfe defines settler colonialism as a land-centered project with the goal of eliminating Indigenous societies.<sup>21</sup> Those considered historical property,

and those dispossessed by settler colonialism, cannot enter into a political-economic system based on liberal individualism.

Environmentally just outcomes cannot be expected within existing liberal and capitalist institutions, and they cannot rely on market-based or technology-dependent solutions. Environmental justice activists frame their goals in these terms, especially in their engagement with climate change. Climate justice activists imagine a transition from an oil to a clean-energy economy in a way that does not rely on the market. These activists focus on battling climate change and economic inequality together, with the conviction that “decarbonizing energy and cutting its use in the rich world” can be done in an “egalitarian and exciting way” that does not re-create market logics.<sup>22</sup>

While social movements vary wildly in their politics and approaches, there are recurrent threads and themes. Environmental justice perspectives link justice to freedom and de-link freedom from the market and free enterprise. To do so is to reject what scholars Raj Patel and Jason Moore call Cheap Nature and the cheapening of life. Cheap Nature is the foundational process that enables the cheapening of money, work, care, food, energy, and lives. Environmental justice movements eschew the marketizing and cheapening of life, labor, and land. Justice movements foreground work, care, food, energy, and lives given short shrift in the current global political-economic order.<sup>23</sup>

Climate and environmental justice advocates conceptualize and reframe their problems and center their lived experiences and histories. People of color, particularly African Americans and Indigenous peoples, have been made to live within environmental and bodily risk historically, specifically dispossession and racism.<sup>24</sup> Insurgency and environmental justice as a freedom struggle can reach beyond incorporation into liberal democracy or under

settler colonialism. For environmental justice movements, creative, generative, and bottom-up relationships are their *raison d'être*. So too are history, art, love, and refusal.

Environmental justice is thus a “structure of feeling.” Marxist cultural critic Raymond Williams uses this concept to link the social to the personal and to advance a theory of the social that is not just the institutional or formal.<sup>25</sup> Environmental justice as freedom can mean freedom from the violence of histories and systems that structure the present. It can mean freedom from oil and gas and a carbon economy that trades in death and destruction. It can mean freedom to create and reimagine worlds different from those that are “common sense.”

Environmental justice is more than resistance to environmental racism and colonialism. It is a set of concepts and living practices that cross time, generations, and space. Freedom is also a capacious set of practices and ways of living in the intersecting realms of social relations, including those inflected by gender, youth, and sexuality.<sup>26</sup>

#### FORWARD DREAMING IN MOMENTS OF CRISES

Environmental racism and environmental justice are broad concepts, referring to problems that predate the movement’s coinage and organization in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>27</sup> Environmental justice can mean the social movements, the public policies, and the academic fields. Traditional accounts focus on the general idea that environmental and pollution problems (which often have health consequences) manifest unequally. In policy or sociological terms, environmental racism or inequality is an expression of conflicts that distribute environmental risks (exposures)

and rewards (amenities) in a socially stratified way (via race and class).

Environmental justice (EJ) was formulated in the United States in response to the articulation of environmental racism (ER) in the 1980s, leading to the “Principles of Environmental Justice” (1991) and President Clinton’s executive order on environmental justice (1994).<sup>28</sup> Environmental racism suggests that race and racism are independent factors that influence environmental harms and the differential responses to pollution.<sup>29</sup> Other views of racism and power later gained influence within environmental justice research. In her study of prisons, geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned and extralegal exposure of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>30</sup> Some argue that environmental racism is state-sanctioned violence.<sup>31</sup> Historian Robin Kelley has said in public lectures that “the world is Flint,” in that the mass lead poisoning in that city is a direct result of privatization and neoliberalism and its racialized consequences.<sup>32</sup> The ongoing impacts of Hurricane Maria have been understood by activists on- and off-island as not just humanitarian and public health disasters but through a climate injustice/justice frame, early expression of which was made crystal clear during 2005’s Hurricane Katrina.

Using disasters and structural environmental violence as twin frames, this book prioritizes the voices and histories of the environmental justice movement. It is through their perspectives that we can face our present moment with clarity, hope, and principled intensity. Environmental justice is interconnected in the worldview that it advocates advance, focused on intersectionality and power and organized around social and racial justice, whereas polluters and government agencies argue for separation (for example, health as distinct from environmen-

tal conditions or housing as unrelated to poverty). In contrast, environmental justice advocates argue precisely for these linkages as commonsense and based on lived historical experiences.

The expansion and transformation of the meanings of environmental justice and environmental racism track American Studies and its shift from its U.S.-centered frame to a more analytically deep and geographically dispersed framework for understanding “America.” American Studies, which began in the 1930s, has a fraught history in relation to American exceptionalism—the ideology that the United States is destined to follow “a path of history different from the laws or norms that govern other countries.”<sup>33</sup> The field evolved through the 1960s, influenced by liberation movements around race, gender, imperialism, and war. American Studies connects approaches to culture and power, the past and present, and the United States with the world. American Studies and environmental justice are intimately connected to social movements on the ground. Although the field is far more complex, suffice to say that American Studies is defined by the how (interdisciplinarity) and the what (America and American exceptionalism).

American exceptionalism in the post-American century is devastatingly clear in the case of climate change and climate policy, which by definition are issues of justice and disproportionality. With just 5 percent of the world’s population, the United States is responsible for 28 percent of the world’s excess carbon emissions.<sup>34</sup> Just one hundred companies are responsible for 71 percent of carbon emissions.<sup>35</sup> The United States follows China in terms of absolute emissions but also has double the per capita emissions.<sup>36</sup> Climate justice is also a question of responsibility and morality. President Trump has called climate change a hoax and has signaled that the United States will leave the

Paris Climate Accords, saying the agreement is detrimental to U.S. (business) interests.<sup>37</sup> Yet, U.S. responsibilities go far beyond carbon emissions. American post–World War II technological and corporate culture saw the improvement of nature through technology and increased efficiency as central to the larger political-economic project of development and progress. It has been precisely in this postwar moment, known as the Great Acceleration, in which extreme and sudden spikes in pollution and environmental harm have come into being.<sup>38</sup>

Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s famous motto—Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will—structures my teaching, outlook, and indeed this book. The intellect, however, is not just a preserve of the pessimist:

Too much criticism can feed despair about these “End Times” and can paralyse the will. We surely need an *optimist of the intellect*: theories and concrete studies that map out a more hopeful future, yet ground strategy in realist historical analysis. Perhaps we need to fine-tune our political-intellectual outlook to fit today’s chaotic world, where possibilities and catastrophe coexist so intimately. . . . We need to recover . . . “forward dreaming.”<sup>39</sup>

Forward dreaming is not based on delusion or naïve innocence but on politics grounded in values. Although to be an optimist is to risk “disappointment and the charge of foolishness,” optimism is essential because of the dearth of “hopeful stories about the future” that serve to “express our dreams and desires and correspond to the full range of our experience.”<sup>40</sup> Thus the struggle of social movements is, in Robin Kelley’s words, to ask and answer: “How do we produce a vision that enables us to see beyond our immediate ordeals? How do we transcend bitterness and cynicism and embrace love, hope, and an all-encompassing dream of freedom, especially in these rough times?”<sup>41</sup>

This book offers environmental justice struggles as a set of cautiously hopeful stories about future and freedom that we need now in rough times, especially when the very notion of future is under great stress due to climate change and assaults on human and social freedom. The optimism *and* the pessimism are that environmental justice movements have been fighting against authoritarianism, extractive industries, rapacious corporate capitalism, white supremacy, and government collusion for a long time. The arguments that environmental justice advocates have been making are gaining visibility and traction outside local communities.

Environmental justice—the analytics and movements—make sense to more and more people who, in less obvious moments, may have settled for an “end of history” or a “color-blind” post-ideological ideology. American studies’ tools and approaches, in teaching and scholarship, inform many fields. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is a process in which institutions and historical forces work together to garner consent, and it allows for transformation. Hegemony reveals change over time, showing how what is “common sense” becomes naturalized and is actually a product of institutional and historical influences that are complex and contradictory. Kelley writes:

It is not enough to imagine a world without oppression (especially since we don’t always recognize the variety of forms or modes in which oppression occurs), but [we need] understanding [of] the mechanisms or processes that not only reproduce structural inequality but make them common sense, and render those processes natural or invisible. The Black Radical Imagination is not a thing but a process, the ideas generated from what Gramsci calls a “philosophy of practice.” It is about how people in transformative social movements moved/shifted their ideas, rethought inherited categories, tried to locate and overturn blatant, subtle, and invisible modes of domination.<sup>42</sup>

Environmental justice movements, cultures, and worldviews are a counterhegemonic philosophy of practice, a search for freedom beyond local communities fighting bad environmental or regulatory systems. Environmental justice is not (just) about state-centered policy, incorporation, or reformism. It challenges the status quo rather than fixing or tinkering with a system grounded in domination, racial terror, and colonial control.

This book argues that environmental justice movements are freedom struggles. Environmental justice movements have always been about cultures of freedom through imagining and enacting solidarity, radical hope, anti-consumerism and anti-capitalism.<sup>43</sup> Freedom is not an abstraction but is grounded in global and internationalist critiques of imperialism and takes labor, race, class, gender, and sexuality seriously. Many young people are imagining a world different from the one they are inheriting. Populist authoritarianism, militarized security discourses, attachment to racism, regressive gender and sexuality categories and policies, and petrocultures are the preserve of a dying generation of toxic policies and peoples. Those who fear the new world order are the authoritarians who attack climate, economic, and war refugees from Syria, from U.S. wars in Central America, and throughout the world.

Focusing on future and freedom alongside culture, change, and community offers a crucial explanation for the predicament identified by revolutionaries and intellectuals. My (tempered) optimism is structured by experience, analysis using the values of social and environmental justice movements, and everyday interactions with people (especially the very young and elders). I have witnessed the prevailing culture and production of ignorance about environmental injustice and racism change, sometimes in quite marked and sudden ways. For example, broad

awareness of Standing Rock and of the lead poisonings in Flint was enabled through social media.

Some changes take longer, but things do sometimes change for the better from a racial and environmental justice perspective, especially one that is intersectional at its roots. In the mid-1990s, the Sierra Club (with other mainstream environmental organizations) was fervently critiqued by communities of color for its demographics and approaches to environmental problems (focused on lawsuits, land trusts, and national-level policy at the expense of local community organizing).<sup>44</sup> Anti-immigration and population-control advocates made eugenic arguments appealing to racist elements within mainstream environmentalism on the logic that more people mean more pollution, and hence, expanding immigration restrictions was good environmental policy. Regressive and racist elements explicitly connected anti-immigration beliefs and environmentalism. These elements sought inroads to take power within the Sierra Club. The anti-immigrant faction lost its attempt to join the board of directors in a bitterly contested election.<sup>45</sup> To fight this effort, a broad coalition emerged with its own vision of interconnection. Over the last two decades, new discussions and alliances took center stage. In 2016 the Sierra Club endorsed the platform of Black Lives Matter, stating that police violence was an environmental issue, a stance unimaginable two decades earlier.<sup>46</sup>

However, despite some changes in the discursive and organizational realms, serious environmental and health problems remain stubbornly high, concentrated among the poor, the politically disenfranchised, and people of color. For example, asthma is an individualized and group disease that constrains lives and life chances. It contributes to overall levels of poor health, high stress, and premature death. Asthma is shaped by