

**Landscapes of Environmental Injustice:  
The Environmental Justice Movement  
in Context**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, the environmental justice movement is introduced through a study of its historical context, and the structures of environmental, economic and social disparities in North America. The principles of environmental justice and its primary community organizing strategies are addressed to illustrate how environmental justice is alternative to mainstream environmentalism. Also discussed are some of the tensions and challenges within the environmental justice movement. Contrary to some arguments in published literature, I argue that the movement for environmental justice is not a branch of mainstream environmentalism, but a movement in its own right.

## Introduction

The environmental justice movement in the United States emerged in the 1980's, when people began to realize that the increasing number of cases of pollution, toxic contamination and deteriorating human health were consistently located in poor neighbourhoods and communities of colour (Bullard, 1993; Field, 1997). Polluting sources such as waste disposal facilities (incinerators, dumps, transfer stations), toxic industries, sewage treatment facilities, as well as resource extraction activities release chemicals such as lead, mercury, zinc, arsenic, dioxins, and PCBs into the environment. The effects of these chemicals are linked to increasing rates of respiratory problems, birth defects, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and learning disabilities.

One of the earliest cases of environmental discrimination in the U.S., that is the disproportionate burden of hazardous and toxic uses in low-income and communities of colour, was identified in the 1960's. Two prominent cases in the late 1970's and early 1980's propelled the beginnings of the environmental justice movement, one of which took place in 1977 with the case of Love Canal. Love Canal was a working-class, predominantly white neighbourhood built on top of an infilled-canal in Buffalo, New York. Alarmed that their basements were constantly flooded with noxious liquids, many community members soon found that the substances had serious health effects on their children (Grossman, 1992). The successful struggle has since led to the establishment of the Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW, now the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice).

Another well-known incident took place in 1982, when the Commission for Racial Justice, a civil rights organization, allied with local residents in Warren County, North Carolina, a predominantly African American community, to protest the disposal of PCB-contaminated waste in the community (Grossman, 1992). More than 500 protesters were arrested in a non-violent civil disobedience action at the site; the significance of which has led to numerous subsequent actions by poor people and people of colour fighting environmental injustices. Other cases that fuelled the movement's beginnings include the first lawsuit charging environmental discrimination filed in 1979 by

predominantly African American residents in Houston against a solid waste company (Bullard, 1994).

Growing out of largely local, urban initiatives to oppose unwanted toxic facilities and industries within a community, grassroots organizing for environmental justice critically links social concerns with environmental issues (Di Chiro, 1992). Moreover, people of colour, and low-income communities make this link possible by an altogether different framing of what 'environment' means. This notion is fundamentally related to the disproportionate environmental burdens in these communities, thus shaping the way 'environment' is distinctly conceptualized from that defined by mainstream environmentalism. The latter is historically based on ideological notions of environment as "being pristine, wild and natural", separated from humans. Concerns for human health and economic sustainability in workplaces or urban areas are generally not considered part of the mainstream environmental agenda (Taylor, 1993; Bullard, 1993; Di Chiro, 1992). As such, the preservation-conservation agenda approach to environmental issues has largely excluded those who live in urban areas, and who face environmental conditions that threaten their health and livelihoods. The division between mainstream environmentalism and environmental justice also represents broad societal relations. Marginal communities to the dominant, societal power structures (in their identities, livelihoods, location and ideas) are likewise excluded from the ideological principles and membership of mainstream environmentalism.

In this paper, I situate the historical context of environmental justice by addressing the systemic structuring of environmental and social disparities. I then discuss the principles of environmental justice to illustrate how the concept has been envisioned. I also draw on the community organizing strategies that characterize the movement to show how environmental justice is alternative to mainstream environmentalism. In addition to framing the differences between the two movements, I discuss some of the tensions and challenges within the environmental justice movement. Contrary to some arguments in published literature, I aim to illustrate that the movement for environmental justice is not a branch of mainstream environmentalism, but a movement in its own right.

### ***The Structuring of Environmental Disparities***

Much of the empirical literature dealing with environmental justice issues has established that pollution has disproportionately impacted poor neighbourhoods and communities of colour (Bullard, 1994; Field, 1997; Faber, 1998). Though my focus is on urban environmental inequities in North America, it is critical to understand that First Nations communities have endured the longest legacy of environmental discrimination (La Duke, 1999). As a result of European settlement and colonization in North America, First Nations peoples were forcibly displaced to reserves, on lands that were considered useless and without value. In the age of industrialization, however, these same lands became commodities for natural resource extraction. Field (1997) cites that two-thirds of all uranium resources in the U.S., for example, are located under Native reservations. Historically, multiple and successive environmental risks have been imposed on First Nations (Field, 1997). In Canada, the calls for environmental justice (though rarely been named as such, this will be discussed later), has historically been centred in First Nations communities.

The United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice issued one of the most influential studies on environmental discrimination in 1987. The report found that: three out of five African-American and Latino individuals in the U.S. lived in communities with one or more uncontrolled hazardous waste sites; 60% of African Americans live in communities with one or more abandoned toxic waste sites; and, 40% of the total U.S. landfill capacity is located in communities of colour (UCCRJ, 1987, cited in Bullard, 1994). It also correlated that people of colour were twice as likely as white people to live in communities with a commercial hazardous waste facility, and three times as likely to live near a large landfill or multiple waste facilities. A follow-up study in 1994 confirmed that the risks for people of colour are even higher than in 1980. It found that people of colour are 47% more likely than white people to live near these toxic facilities (Faber, 1998). Numerous studies with similar approaches and findings confirm that pollution levels and their detrimental health effects are directly related to race, ethnicity and income (Bullard, 1994; Faber, 1998).

## **Environmental Regulations: Protection for Whom?**

Although the statistics of uneven distribution of environmental burdens are significant, it is also vital to understand the systemic nature of how these environments have been structured. There are two apparent influences on the structuring of environmental disparity: who is in control of the dominant system shaping our environments, and what form or types of systems have been created to do so. Bullard (1994) describes that current environmental decision-making couples science, technology, economics, politics, 'special interests' and ethics, which reflect the broader social climate, where discrimination is institutionalized. His argument reflects the statistics provided in the 1987 UCCCRJ Report that the processes of creating human-settled landscapes are racist, class-based, and I would add, discriminates based on gender. Field (1997) expands on this point by noting that the current system of environmental regulation in the U.S. and most other industrialized nations is predominantly founded on a logic of risk, which means that decision-making rests on pollution control rather than pollution prevention.

The western liberal tradition of environmental policy to regulating pollution inherently assumes that pollution is a natural part of industrial production. Combined with the forces and relations of production in the capitalist economy, both policy and economy have systemically structured global environmental disparities. Faber (1998) discerns that the roots of ecological problems and injustices in the U.S. are "grounded in the expansionary dynamics of the global capitalist system" (p. 2). Capital accumulation and expanding profits necessitates continuous increases in investment and productive capacities, which in turn demands more efficient and cheap production mechanisms, new products, enlarging markets, etc. to assure high rates of economic growth. In the industrial era, the increased use of machine production, growth of the factory system, expansion of wage labour, and the creation of the industrial city have affected our environment. Industrialization has meant that waterways have been used for waste disposal, air as a sink for airborne particulates, and land as a commodity governed only by private land rights and nuisance laws (Field, 1997).

## **Impacts of Trends in Urban Development**

In urban areas, social policy and planning has historically supported dominant socio-economic concerns which work to preserve the economic, political and social status quos (Tucker, 1990). Traditional environmental protection has also meant that richer, predominantly white communities are distanced from pollution sources, while poorer, communities of colour have been located near them (or polluting industries have been sited near the latter) (Bullard, 1994). Clearly, both economic and political systems have also largely shaped our geographic landscapes. This is apparent in urban development models that construct cities with the commercial core surrounded by industry, which borders working class housing, and wealthy housing located on the periphery.

Field (1997) cites the development of the suburban/urban landscape as a result of particular social policies such as promoting single family homes purchases through reduced mortgages and credit restrictions, highway construction, development of city planning regulations such as zoning, economic subsidies for industries, urban renewal trends and the development of mass transit. Spatially, this trend of urban development has direct links to the distribution of environmental burdens (Austin and Schill, 1993). First, those who have been unable to move from older industrial areas suffer from historical industrial contamination, such as lead and soil contaminants from old dump sites. Second, new polluting industries, such as waste disposal facilities, locate in areas with low-property values, and neighbourhoods with less political power, (which are often in areas of former industrial activity). Third, the urban/suburban dynamic has been systemically racialized to prevent low-income people and people of colour to move from inner city neighbourhoods, and are thus forced to live in former and current industrialized areas. For example, in Levittown, New York, one of the earliest suburban communities that set the pattern for subsequent suburban developments housed 82,000 residents in 1960, not one of whom was African American (Manning Thomas and Ritzdorf, 1999). Siting in communities with the least mainstream political and economic power, in addition to policy shifts and economic incentives have created differential environmental landscapes such that poor, communities of colour are most affected by

industrial pollution (Faber, 1998). Indeed, it is through multiple policy mechanisms and trends, such as urban disinvestment that have allowed these phenomena to persist.

Other government policies have also influenced the limited scope of environmental policy. Many authors have asserted that city planning practice reflects the dominant social power structures of an urban environment (Faber, 1998). Numerous American and Canadian examples of how marginalized communities, both in social composition (e.g. low-income), and urban design (e.g. government-sponsored housing), have been subjected to planning decisions that infringe upon a community's health and safety. One illustrative case is of waste facility siting in Houston, Texas, a city that only recently adopted zoning regulations (Bullard & Wright, 1990). Bullard and Wright (1990) argue that discriminatory land-use planning decisions led to locating more than 75% of the city's solid waste facilities in black neighbourhoods (who represent 25% of Houston's total population). The case example reflects how strong stakeholders, with political, social, or economic power, often dominate urban decision-making processes. The Houston case also exemplifies how public input to planning can be ineffectual. Citizens in these neighbourhoods have opposed the waste facilities since the early 1970s; yet, little has been done to remedy their concerns (Bullard & Wright, 1990). Political will is often motivated by economic investment in those localities, as well as claims of accomplishment for election purposes; evidently, politics are significant to land-use decisions (Hodge, 1991). In these cases, the accountability of planning processes is questionable when considering long-term social, environmental and economic benefits for building "efficiently planned" cities. Clearly, those with political, economic and social power work to preserve their conditions of authority; in effect, these structures legitimate racism, classism, and sexism in society.

In Canada, the historical case of Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia exemplifies various elements of the above described processes of urban development, and the interrelations between planning, environmental policy and economic growth. Africville was a segregated poor black community subjected to an unprecedented level of local siting of noxious land uses and facilities. Among these environmental hazards included: a railroad (that ran through the neighbourhood), oil plant/storage complex, two fertilizer manufacturing plants, two slaughter houses, a coal handling facility, tar factory, tannery,

shoe factory, stone crushing plant, foundry, as well as numerous waste dumps and incinerators (McCurdy, 1995). A majority of the community's residents worked at these facilities. Despite continual attempts by members of Africville, the neighbourhood was additionally denied local infrastructural improvements and access to basic necessities such as paved roads, garbage collection, law enforcement, and clean water supply. In the late 1960s, the entire neighbourhood was re-zoned, and the residents were forced to relocate into different neighbourhoods in Halifax. The major decision-making bodies: city planning departments, political representatives (council) and the environmental regulatory agencies collaboratively worked to create Africville's landscape. Because Africville represented the least political and economic resistance to citing polluting industry, these facilities were approved by city planning departments, without adequate environmental assessment, since they were considered investments in Halifax's economy.

### **Industrial Production and Capital Economic Growth**

The way that industrial production emerged in the post-Fordist era has impacted marginal communities in other ways. Companies and industries have become centralized administratively and financially, while decentralized in terms of production. As mentioned earlier, this has led to out-sourced operations in areas with cheaper labour and less strict laws governing labour practices or environmental protection. Furthermore, the rise of mass production has increased in pollution levels (e.g. waste), and the use of synthetic and toxic products has caused a decrease in human labour needs to produce overall higher corporate profits (Faber, 1998). This is seen in agricultural practices, where toxic working conditions is a major concern affecting those workers that do remain in the agriculture industry (e.g., grape harvesters in California). Coupled with the globalization of capital, trade liberalization and relaxing environmental regulations (to facilitate international trade), and other forces of globalization, this phenomena has affected disempowered people and environments world-wide (Athanasίου, 1996).

Another major element of industrialization that has contributed to environmental injustices is in the technological advances in transportation. Two effects of

transportation are: first, as noted above, the development of mass transportation has unlinked historical relations between workers and housing. Mass transportation and highways have increased the distances between suburban residential neighbourhoods and urban industrial or commercial areas, hence facilitating the ability for those who can afford suburban homes to move away from traditional sources of pollution. The second significant effect of transportation trends has been the increased mobility of pollution. An example of this has been the uncoupling between the source of waste production, and the waste product itself. Field (1997) links the capturing of waste to be a result of the pollution control approach of environmental regulation. Waste producers are not accountable to the responsible disposal of waste. Instead, waste is commodified and currently handled by waste management industries in a form that can be transported across local, state and national boundaries, far from the actual point of generation.

In New York City during the late 1980s, this trend became apparent when the city raised its tipping fees (the cost for waste disposal companies to dump) of Fresh Kills; it is the only city-operated landfill in the City, on Staten Island, the most affluent of the city's five boroughs. Almost immediately, private carting companies began to build their own waste transfer stations as intermediary facilities to store waste for export in communities with low land values and many vacant lots. There are currently eighty-five private waste transfer stations in New York City exporting 28,000 tonnes of commercial waste per day. Seventy percent of these facilities are located in communities (mostly low-income) where more than fifty percent of the population are people of colour (Bautista, 1998). The increasing mobility of pollution or "national commerce in waste" has had innumerable impacts of waste transfer stations on human and environmental health. For example, these same neighbourhoods in New York City also have the highest rates of asthma in children in the state.

### **Political Landscapes of Environmental Injustice: Not-In-My-Term-in-Office Syndrome**

The growing political power of industry and capital over governmental sovereignty (in environmental regulations) has not only led to increasing economic and environmental disparity, but also the erosion of democracy, as it becomes a privilege, and accessible

only by a wealthy minority. The way in which these complementary political, social and economic systems operate is fundamentally linked to who has been structuring them. In many western societies where the dominant white, male, middle and upper-class have controlled the development of these structures and processes, this dynamic has defined who receives priority in terms of environmental protection, economic profits and subsidies to facilitate these profits.

The political overtones in each of the case examples used thus far demonstrate this dynamic. In New York City, the closure of Fresh Kills was preceded by statements issued from the deputy commissioner of the local Department of Sanitation in 1996. He stated that the City did not intend to comply with Local Law 40, a ruling by city council in 1990 which mandated that the City adopt siting regulations to prohibit the clustering of these facilities in few communities (Bautista, 1998). Within a few months, the City's Mayor Giuliani and the State Governor Pataki announced their intent to close Fresh Kills by 2002, without an alternate waste management plan. Despite public opposition and lawsuits against the City in reference to the initial statements by the Department of Sanitation, Local Law 40 lacked political backing to be properly instituted. Indeed, although the previous city government had drafted the siting rules, no regulations were formally introduced, hence, it allowed a loop-hole for the Giuliani administration's dealings with the issue.

It is widely known that Mayor Giuliani owes his narrow 1993 election victory to a record turnout of Staten Island voters attracted to the polls as a result of his election promises to that borough. Bautista (1998) reports that many analysts have concluded that the speed and secrecy that accompanied the Fresh Kills closure announcement (without an alternate waste management plan) was political payback for the Staten Island voters as well as its Borough President (the elected local district manager). The multiple transfer stations in a handful of low-income and communities of colour that lack the political and economic clout of Staten Island portrays the political realities of environmental justice struggles. In June, 1999, the Mayor announced an \$81 million project to rebuild a large portion of the Staten Island waterfront as part of a redevelopment plan to create a major centre for commerce, transportation and recreation (Lueck, 1999). Meanwhile, the Giuliani administration has made no moves to

create an alternate waste disposal system to protect from or prevent further burdens (e.g., by implementing programs to reduce garbage production) in the city's already overburdened communities. On the contrary, the City has assisted private companies to draft proposals for handling and exporting the waste diverted from Fresh Kills. The plans are being done free of any siting regulations, environmental review, or public participation, and are each to be valued at over \$100 million.

Political and individual agendas, patronage, party politics and backroom deals are some of the political realities that create and layer disparate environmental landscapes. The lack of accountability by political leaders to its own system, as well as to its constituents (rich *and* poor) is demonstrative of the complexities within local government and city politics, the way the dominant system maintains its power, and the major challenges to the environmental justice movement.

Current environmental policy in North America largely fails to address the forces that produce environmental risk since it values pollution capture and control. This inevitably means that environmental burdens are placed on disempowered communities (Field, 1997). Insufficient environmental policies are directly the result of arbitrary value judgements and assumptions including: scientific uncertainties about new and emerging synthetic chemicals; variable populations considered for base-line studies (i.e. children, adults, seniors); and how waste is defined (i.e. hazardous by-products such as lead are historically not considered "waste") (Bullard, 1994; Field, 1997). Attempts to change policy by environmental justice activists and advocates have centred on the lack of representation and access to governments' environmental decision-making processes, as well as insufficient enforcement of current environmental regulations. I will discuss these initiatives further in the following section. Examining the political, social and economic relations and forces that contribute to the systemic structuring of environmental disparity renders visible a broad understanding of the fundamental causes of environmental injustice. As such, it opens the doors to the transformative potential of the environmental justice movement in the U.S..

## ***Environmental Justice: A Concept and Movement***

Following the above discussion on the multiple forces that create environmental injustices, it is necessary to define the concept of environmental justice in the U.S. context with reference to the Principles of Environmental Justice developed at the First People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., in 1991. The summit is considered a key galvanizing event for the beginnings of the environmental justice movement. The Principles are part of a statement or 'call to action' developed by more than 600 activists of colour that attended the conference<sup>1</sup>. This statement addresses the material and institutional realities of unequal power relations, and the ways that these structured inequalities have distinct environmental consequences for politically, socially, culturally and economically marginal communities (Bullard, 1993; Bullard and Wright, 1990). They convey broad goals as they relate to ecology, policy, decision making roles, working environments, existing hazardous facilities, uses, and products, health, global relations, military, collective cultures and the responsibilities of individuals. It is also contextualized historically to recognize the forces of systemic discrimination against First Nations peoples, as well as immigrant workers.

### **Defining an Alternative Movement**

Though many organizations and activists fighting for environmental justice agree on these Principles, their actions and agendas focus on much more specific objectives. Most groups are grassroots and work on urgent local issues. Environmental justice organizing is distinct from mainstream environmentalism in numerous ways. The Principles highlight one of the key distinctions between the two movements: environmental justice activists envision the elimination, reduction, prevention and, where unavoidable, the equitable distribution of environmental hazards in all communities. Hence, conventional NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard) is shifted to the notion that struggles against noxious land uses that should be "not in *anybody's* backyard".

As mentioned earlier, environmental justice activists have reframed the meaning of 'environment', and have conceptualized various terms that link race, poverty and environmental hazards that challenge mainstream notions. "Environmental racism" is a

term often used interchangeably with “environmental justice”. First defined by Rev. Benjamin Chavis of the UCCCRJ in 1987:

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the environmental movement.

(Rev. Benjamin Chavis, 1987, cited in Grossman, 1994)

This statement is notable because it illustrates how environmental justice activists have historically defined itself in opposition to the mainstream movement. A major criticism of the environmental movement has been its lack of inclusion of issues important to people of colour as a result of its predominantly white membership.

In the *Directory of People of Color Environmental Groups* (Bullard, 1992), over 500 groups in the U.S. and Canada are listed as working on environmental justice concerns. Many have multi-issue agendas and work in local areas, but are linked together through coalitions, networks and alliances nationally and world-wide. They work on anti-toxics campaigns, workplace safety, neighbourhood planning, waste management issues, open space concerns; some groups provide technical assistance, and serve as public information clearinghouses. Taylor (1993) notes that many groups fighting for environmental justice are initiated because of a single issue, but emerge to include a multi-issue agenda. In New York City, for example, an environmental justice project of one of the member groups of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance started by working on the waste transfer stations issue in Hunts Point, South Bronx. It has since broadened its campaign to struggles for open space, access to waterfront, and monitoring local industries to reduce truck traffic in the neighbourhood. Through the Alliance, it has also supported city-wide efforts on these and other issues. A major contribution of the environmental justice movement has been to challenge long-held assumptions about risks and hazards. Environmental justice activists consider cumulative risks, rather than considering hazards to human health and environment in

isolation. Hence, the development of broad multi-issue initiatives is a common direction for many such groups.

Environmental justice activists consist of people who have been involved in social justice struggles (civil rights, housing, labour), as well as folks who have little previous experience with political activism. The movement has a strong women's leadership, and the use of experiential knowledge is a key mobilizing force behind struggles for environmental justice. Activists in the grassroots environmental justice movement employ altogether different organizing strategies that draw on local resources (St. Clair and Issel, 1997; Taylor, 1993). They work in contrary to large, established, mainstream environmental organizations, known as the "Big Ten" that include the Environmental Defense Fund, Sierra Club, Greenpeace and the Nature Conservancy with budgets of as high as US\$337 million. The work of environmental justice groups goes beyond policy and litigation battles to include direct action, building grassroots capacity to do research through working with technical assistance groups, community education, and networking with broad social justice initiatives. In 1990, networks of environmental justice groups demanded that mainstream organizations raise attention to their historical exclusion and lack of accountability to low income and communities of colour. Di Chiro (1992) writes that while many rejected these calls, some mainstream organizations such as Greenpeace have responded cooperatively in their willingness to share resources and dialogue on bridging different movements. However, the overall histories and agendas of mainstream (preservation-conservation) and environmental justice groups (linked social justice and environment concerns) remain fundamentally distinct.

### **A Movement in its Own Right**

In addition to the issues addressed, the people involved and the localities for action, another difference between environmental justice and mainstream organizations is in the strength of grassroots networks, alliances and coalitions (Taylor, 1993; Di Chiro, 1992). Evident in the statement preceding the Principles of Environmental Justice is the recognition of the need to work across race, class, and gender lines. Environmental justice groups range from those that are all, or primarily, African-American, Native

American, Puerto Rican, Latino and Asian American to multiracial coalitions, and some that include white members (Bullard, 1992). For example, some prominent U.S. groups such as the Labor/Community Strategy Center (Los Angeles) is a multiracial coalition, Mothers of East L.A. are of Latin American descent, Asian Pacific Environmental Network is a west-coast Asian Pacific Islander group, and in Toronto, Canada, the diverse Multiracial Network for Environmental Justice. Self-identified as serving communities of colour, these organizations are distinct from the predominantly white mainstream.

Secondly, there is an understanding in environmental justice organizing that people of colour must also bridge issues that have been historically considered separate problems. Pam Tau Lee, a labour organizer in California affirms:

if you're talking about lead and where people live, it used to be a housing struggle, if you're talking about poisoning on the job it used to be a labor struggle, people being sick from TB or occupational exposures used to be separate health issues...

(Pam Tau Lee, cited in Di Chiro, 1992)

In essence, environmental justice merges these issues to address the root of the problems, and the causes of these phenomena. The connections of once separate issues have helped to galvanize different movements and to mobilize networks and coalition building locally, regionally and internationally.

Despite its promising potential as an effective social movement, numerous tensions persist within environmental justice among activists and academics. One debate in published literature concerns how the environmental justice movement is interpreted, represented and named. Gottlieb (1993), Faber (1998), and Epstein (1997) call the coupling of social justice issues with environmental concerns 'new environmentalism'. Di Chiro (1996) challenges the applicability of such a term. She concurs that it is an emerging movement, but contests the underlying meanings of the phrase.

First, environmental justice activists are unlikely to self-identify as 'new environmentalists' because their work is not based on the preservation-conservation

values which characterize the mainstream movement. Di Chiro (1992) finds that environmental justice activists can be better represented as 'new' civil rights or social justice activists, since the roots of many involved in environmental justice struggles are in civil rights, welfare rights, and labour movements. As well, the term implies that members of these emerging grassroots organizations have only recently become interested in or aware of the importance of 'environmental' concerns (Taylor, 1990; Di Chiro, 1992). Much of the literature proves this claim false by documenting experiences of various activists and communities with respect to how 'environmentalism' has historically been practised, but not identified as such (Bullard, 1993; Taylor, 1990; Di Chiro, 1996; Austin and Schill, 1994; Sze, 1997; Pulido, 1996). What *is* new about the environmental justice movement are the processes of redefinition and reinvention of political-cultural discourses and practices around local environmental actions. By articulating the concepts of 'environmental justice', 'environmental discrimination' and 'environmental racism', the movement addresses struggles that are not strictly 'environmental'. Together with the distinct ways of grassroots organizing for environmental justice, the movement creates the possibilities for fundamental social and environmental change (Taylor, 1990; Di Chiro, 1996; Pulido, 1996).

I argue that this differential naming and representation of the environmental justice movement illustrates a tension between those writing about the movement and community activists. Essentially, calling environmental justice the 'new environmentalism' further marginalizes the communities involved in the struggle. The term negates their histories, identities and livelihoods, which inform its approaches to community activism. This naming also does not recognize that the movement poses fundamentally different issues and forms of action to issues concerning the environment.

On another front, many environmental justice activists have focussed on the significance of race as a primary signifier of environmental discrimination. As described above, much of the published research report extensively on the correlations between race and environmental problems that aim to affirm or dismiss the existence of racist patterns of pollution. Pulido (1996) critiques this focus as narrow and reductionist. They contend that it limits the interpretation of the problems as well as the possibilities for

changing the entrenched systemic processes and structures that have created these landscapes. A discord emerges in the ultimate goals of community activists working for environmental justice: to transform the system or to make the system 'work for us'. This particular tension will be discussed throughout the paper. Another problem of representation may be that the efforts of the environmental justice movement has been overwhelmingly defined in opposition to the mainstream. Ironically, the consistent referent of the mainstream for environmental justice organizing has in some ways legitimated the 'old' and 'new' dichotomy, despite its wholly different roots.

Directly linked to the issues of representation in environmental justice organizing is the difference between academic and activist perspectives in 'published literature' and other sources. For example, the divergent ways of calling issues ('hegemonic' versus 'power') and identities ('subaltern' and 'poor') affects who is drawn to the movement. The increasing intellectualization of environmental justice strongly shapes how such concerns are articulated and who mobilizes on the issues. Some activists warn that this trend may disrupt the grassroots nature of the environmental justice movement. Paradoxically, in the past, the validation of the movement's arguments on environmental discrimination in broader society, (e.g. at government levels) was through empirical research by academics who are people of colour. They have theorized from concrete experiences, and have carried out what hooks (1994) calls a liberatory practice. And yet, as research papers increased, so did conferences and forums for discussion and analysing environmental justice issues that attracted a distinctly different audience than its initiators. A balance between academic involvement and grassroots action appears to be a significant issue for the movement. For the Northeast Environmental Justice Network, the way to deal with this increasingly academic collective of organizations working for environmental justice was for the activists to approach the academics, and request that they take a secondary, supportive role to grassroots efforts. The groups in the Network are presently undergoing a shifting of roles and responsibilities to the collective.

A related tension is a debate on the effectiveness of environmental justice as an identity-based movement. Many groups mentioned above stress the multiracial nature of the environmental justice movement, and the importance of organizing as people "of

colour". Some of the literature on community organizing finds identity politics to be divisive and ineffectual in long-term social movement building. The argument is that identity politics polarizes people along social identity lines.

Pulido (1996) notes that environmental justice activists have strategically chosen race as the primary indicator for environmental discrimination, and though she critiques its use as limiting broad social analysis, the need for activists to have a shared identity as a basis for organizing against dominant systems is recognized. Tensions among different ethnic groups, however, is a reality that environmental justice organizers need to address. Intra-group conflicts due to internalized racism and prejudices is a challenge to broad-based organizing. In spite of this, I believe that the collective identity of people of colour as a basis for organizing, and the individual racial and ethnic identities that it comprises, can be given new meanings and significance that mobilizes political action. This practice serves to affirm the histories of marginalized peoples, and it unites people across ethnic and racial identities to work on common issues. In a discussion on Asian American political movements, Aguilar-San Juan (1994) asserts that activists must not reduce race to a matter of identity, but to expand people's experiences of racism into a critique of the social, political and economic power structures and systems that perpetuate racism. She contends that identity is a product of particular historical contexts, as well as multiple economic and social events. By choosing race as a key organizing approach, I agree that it allows people the power to "define and articulate these experiences in all their complexity" (Aguilar-San Juan, 1994). Such an analysis then opens up the possibilities to begin dismantling the systemic power structures that manifest racist practice, and racism itself.

## **Conclusion**

The history, people, places, issues and strategies involved in the environmental justice movement distinguishes it as wholly separate from the mainstream environmental movement. Indeed, mainstream environmentalism in many ways affirms the systems and structures that perpetuate the threats to physical environments through notions of sustainable development, for example, which promotes capital growth and inherently poses a greater danger to human and physical environments. I argue then that because

the U.S. movement for environmental justice fundamentally challenges these very systems, it embodies the transformative potential as a social movement necessary to achieve healthy social, political, physical and economic environments for all people.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The statement was developed at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991: We, the people of color, gathered together to begin 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 on 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 insure 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.

### 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.

...demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all people, free from any form of discrimination or bias.

...mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.

...calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threatens the fundamental right to clean air, land, water and food.

...affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples.

...demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.

...demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning implementation, enforcement and evaluation.

...affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.

...protects the rights of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.

...considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration On Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.

...must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.

...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 our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.

...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.

...opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.

...opposes military occupations, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.

...calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.

...requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

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