

# **Book Review: *Environmental Justice In A Moment of Danger* by Julie Sze**

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## Art, Culture, and Environmental Justice

Julie Sze's *Environmental Justice In A Moment of Danger* uses a number of key sites including Standing Rock; Flint, Hurricane Katrina, and Maria to elaborate the entanglements of environmental injustice with racism, capitalism, franchise, and settler colonialism and forms of gender-based violence. Divided into three chapters, the text highlights various technologies utilized by the state to dispossess People of Color (POC); technologies of debility that also feed into the state's construction of POC as violent threats and criminals. Each case examined by Sze presents her with an opportunity to reflect on the methods of self-representation and counter strategies of visibility that native populations and black liberation movements are using to rewrite and rescue themselves from violent state apparatus.

Sze recognizes that there are features of the different sites that she pulls together that cannot be collapsed- this is not her project. Instead, analyzing these sites together shows for example debility which ranges from physical incapacitation, lack of access to enabling environment, lack of access to clean air and water, food insecurity, incarceration, lack of social support and land theft are biopolitical ends of the same system; are investments in neoliberal capitalism and a means of preventing active forms of resistance to the racial capitalist system. It

is through the frameworks of slow violence and premature death, Sze poignantly makes these connections.

One of the key interventions that Sze makes in the text is to bring into focus cultural production as both knowledge production and a political tactic for making visible the problems with U.S exceptionalism and the ways POC communities have suffered disproportionately from environmental injustice wrought from racial capitalism. That is cultural work is an important technology for showcasing the embeddedness of structural dispossession and works against the strategies of disappearance. Specifically, Sze foregrounds storytelling as a key component of environmental justice for how it utilizes narratives and experiences (56). She writes:

*storytelling is a deeply political act that brings a radical democratic vision to an issue often seen as largely scientific, based on the engineering of the real of policy-making. Community stories “contribute to undermining the legitimacy of the state officials and their policies and to shifting public consciousness around the human right to water.” storytelling is communal and ideological performance that involves both the telling and the act of listening. It “counters individualism and internalization” so that people’s individual experiences are transformed into a collective narrative ( 68)*

Thus, not only do stories do critical memory work that scholars like Tiffany King and Christina Shape call attention to as necessary for sustaining the hope and liveness within the struggle but storytelling troubles sophisticated attempts by the state to conceal sexualization, privation, predation - the racializing assemblages engineered by the state for profit. In short, and using Sze’s framing, storytelling makes visible how “broken places and people of color go hand in hand” (57).

While Sze’s account is of a capitalist framework that is relentless in its *wastelanding* (to invoke Traci Voyles), the book is actually quite hopeful. This is owed to how she keeps coming back to indigenous resurgence and alliances that have been forged in the seemingly unlikely

places. The restorative environmental justice framework that she advances in the final chapter relies on the very same practices that have kept native nations in place and have allowed the struggle to continue even in the face of immense tragedy. She writes:

*troubles, mourning, hospitality, and love are precisely the modes of engagement that people of color, particularly Native peoples and African Americans have relied on as generative spaces of hope in the face of ongoing structural death and violence (84)*

So while there is a general acknowledgment among environmental justice activists - those who share native nations understanding of the interconnectedness of all forms of human and non-human life- that there can never be pre-contact type restoration, if the systems of accountability established within Native nations were to take root- then freedom is the outcome.