

## **Unexpected Affiliations: Environmental Justice and the New Social Movements**

*George Lipsitz*

I'm not going to confine myself to some narrow particularism. But I don't intend either to become lost in a disembodied universalism [. . .] I have a different idea of universal. It is a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all. (Kelley 5-6)

—*Aime Cesaire*

In the United States, environmental injuries are almost always racial injuries because they exert a disproportionate impact on communities of color. Race-based movements for social justice have emerged as some of the most militant and active participants in the fight against environmental pollution. Mainstream environmental advocacy groups still number too few people of color among their members and too infrequently acknowledge the disparate racial effects of environmental degradation on communities of color. Grass-roots activists from aggrieved populations, however, have played important roles in exposing and contesting public and private policies that poison air, water, and food, that locate toxic waste dumps near residential populations and that permeate the workplace with pollutants that damage the lives and well-being of workers.

As scholar/activist Laura Pulido explains, “Environmental racism denotes non-whites’ disproportionate exposure to various forms of pollution and environmental hazards” while “environmental justice is the name of the movement that has arisen to counter these inequities” (“Environmentalism” 172). The environmental justice movement helps unite members within and across different aggrieved racial groups by focusing attention on some of the concrete ways in which race takes on significance in daily life as residential segregation, neighborhood exposure to pollutants, and occupational safety hazards. The movement goes beyond discourses of exclusion rooted in liberal individualism—beyond challenging isolated acts of discrimination aimed at individuals—to instead expose the collective

**WORKS AND DAYS 47/48, Vol. 24, Nos. 1&2, 2006**

practices and patterns that produce inequality and that keep whole collectivities subordinate to others. In this way, the environmental justice movement switches attention away from minority victimization toward white privilege, revealing members of aggrieved minority groups to be not so much disadvantaged as taken advantage of by white supremacy.

Advocates of environmental justice conduct their struggle as a matter of self-defense, out of the recognition that race has a spatial and an environmental dimension. They see that any “universal” struggle to save the environment and support sustainable development must acknowledge the particular problem that environmental racism poses for working class communities of color. At the same time, they recognize that the solution to the particular problems confronting people of color must entail systemic changes in relationships between humans and the environment, as well between different groups of humans.

Struggles for environmental justice also create new understandings of how race functions as a social force. Incidents and patterns of environmental racism do not conform to the anti-discrimination paradigm of liberalism. They are almost always experienced collectively and cumulatively, rather than individually and in isolation. They present unique opportunities for alliances and affiliations among aggrieved communities of color, and they compel environmentalists, health care professionals, city planners, and ordinary citizens to recognize the relevance of race in unique ways.

Emphasis on environmental and health issues within race-based movements for social justice is hardly a new phenomenon. The race-based movements of the 1960s spoke to the environmental injuries and medical needs of their communities as an essential part of their organizing strategies. The Black Panther Party exposed the medical establishment’s disinterest in testing and treating diseases most often faced by African Americans, especially lead poisoning and sickle cell anemia (Hilliard and Cole 14, 339, 383). The inaugural public struggle of the Puerto Rican nationalist Young Lords Party in New York entailed an effort to pressure city sanitation officials to pick up trash and garbage in their neighborhoods. The group also developed programs to address lead poisoning, tuberculosis, and anemia (Guzman 53; Morales 215-6). In 1970, one hundred members of the Young Lords occupied Lincoln Hospital in Manhattan to dramatize their grievances about the quality of health care available to their community (Ogbar 157).

The American Indian Movement developed as a pan-ethnic alliance of people from diverse tribes united by common experiences with oppression including high incidences of cancer and other diseases as a result of nuclear testing and storage of nuclear waste on and near Indian reservations (Smith and Warrior 190; Churchill 293). The American Indian Movement’s shootout with law enforcement officials in Pine Ridge, South Dakota in 1975 emanated in part from decisions by corrupt Pine Ridge Tribal Chair Dickie Wilson to grant mineral exploitation rights in the sacred Black Hills to large oil companies (Cole and Foster 26).

Even the more traditional trade union struggle waged by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union succeeded in uniting Mexican American farm workers with consumers through a shared struggle against the growers' use of pesticides on crops (Pulido 57-124).

Today, young Laotian immigrant women still in high school have joined with the African American-led West County Toxics Coalition in Richmond, California to fight against the storage of toxic, explosive, and corrosive chemicals near their homes, lax safety practices by nearby refineries that have resulted in explosions and accidental emissions of pollutants, and against lead and other contaminants in the ground, water, and air. African American activists in Milwaukee, New York, Boston, Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago, and Los Angeles have mounted campaigns designed to pressure city and state officials to enforce laws banning lead-based paint on the interior walls of apartments and houses inhabited by children from low-income families. Native American activists in Wisconsin have taken the lead in establishing an inter-racial coalition against efforts by Exxon and other multinational corporations to mine sulfide deposits in the environmentally sensitive Wolf River Watershed region. Chicano community activists in San Diego struggle against the way their neighborhoods are disproportionately impacted by pollutants from shipyards, chrome-plating shops, traffic from nearby highways, and storage of toxic wastes close to concentrations of population.

These struggles against environmental racism conform to the characteristics usually associated with "new social movements" in that they are locally based, territorially defined, pragmatically oriented toward immediate ameliorative reforms, and organized around the social identities of race rather than around ideological critiques of capitalism (Touraine *passim*). Yet the racialization of space and the spatialization of race are class projects in the U.S. By concentrating the worst hazards environmental hazards in minority communities, capitalists attempt to divide the working class, to recruit white workers to the cause of uncontrolled development, and to make the health injuries suffered by working class communities of color appear to stem from their own poor choices about nutrition, health, and housing rather than from corporate recklessness and greed. Yet precisely because spatial segregation plays a vital role in the ideological legitimacy and political hegemony of capitalism, the challenges posed to environmental racism from within aggrieved communities of color contain the potential to create struggles that unite the particular and the universal in new ways, that start with the situated knowledge and specific oppressions of working class people of color and then proceed to build affiliations and identifications capable of challenging the pursuit of profit as the primary principle guiding individual and collective life.

Aggrieved communities of color are positioned to play a prominent role in the environmental justice movement because they experience their identities as raced subjects always in concert with deadly health consequences. For them, environmental activism is a matter of direct self-defense. The movement for environmental justice has

also demonstrated, however, that communities lacking in material resources can draw on rich legacies of struggle that arm them with sophisticated and supple strategies when confronting contemporary configurations of power. Unlike trade unions and political parties, race-based movements for social justice remain important sites for the preservation of collective memories of past struggles and for the generation of both the organic solidarity and the connecting strategies required by contemporary social movements.

Despite the important victories of the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s, racial discrimination in the United States still denies people of color the full and free exercise of their rights as citizens and as humans. It imposes systematic obstacles to asset accumulation and barriers against bargaining freely over wages and working conditions. It relegates members of aggrieved racial groups to grossly unequal and inadequate access to education, housing, employment and health care. Housing segregation and the location of environmental hazards combine to make race the most important variable in determining who breathes polluted air, develops toxic amounts of lead in their bloodstreams, or eats fish poisoned by mercury. Corporations found criminally negligent for maintaining illegal toxic waste sites near neighborhoods inhabited by whites receive penalties in the courts five hundred percent higher than the penalties imposed on polluters of neighborhoods inhabited by racial minorities (Bullard "Anatomy" 21; "Environmental" 9-10). Sixty percent of African Americans and Latinos and close to fifty percent of Asian Americans in the U.S. dwell in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites (Lee 49; Tai 207).

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles are more than seven times as likely to contract tuberculosis as whites (Landsberg B7). African American infants are twice as likely as white infants to be born with low birth weights and twice as likely to die in infancy (Edelman 11). Close to seventy-five thousand African Americans die every year because of unequal access to nutrition, health care, and environmental protection (Shields 3). Asian immigrant workers across the country find themselves concentrated in industries replete with occupational health hazards such as dry cleaning, textile manufacturing and assembly, fishing, and microelectronics (Tai 189). Native Americans as a group experience the highest rates of death from plague disease, exposure, and malnutrition. The infant mortality rate among Indians is fifteen times the national average. Native men living on reservations have a life expectancy of 44.6 years compared to the national average of 71.8 years for non-Indian men. Indian women living on reservations have a life expectancy of 47.8 years compared to 80 years for non-Indian women (Churchill 293). Navajo teenagers experience organ cancer at a rate 17 times the national average (Wenz 66). In areas like the Mescalero Apache reservation, where the U.S. government has tested atomic weapons, Indian children experience bone cancer at five times the national average and are twice as likely to be born with learning disabilities and congenital or genetic abnormalities than Indian children born elsewhere (Churchill 294, 308).

Forty-three percent of the electronics and computer assembly line workers in California's "Silicon Valley" are Asian Americans—most of them women. They experience occupational illnesses three times as frequently as workers in general manufacturing, suffering especially from damage to their reproductive and nervous systems. More than half of all textile and apparel workers in the U.S. are women of Asian descent. They contract respiratory illnesses frequently because of the increased exposure to arsenic, formaldehyde, dyes, and fiber particles that is a routine part of their work (Sze 92). The health of these vulnerable immigrant workers is endangered, in part, because their employers know that they can violate workplace safety laws routinely with impunity. The state of New York employs only five Department of Labor inspectors to monitor the state's more than four thousand garment assembly workplaces. In California, state and federal inspectors inspect less than twenty-five percent of the garment shops every year. In addition, penalties for violations are so small that employers can easily consider the occasional fine as merely a small cost of doing business (Foo 69).

In the Chicano neighborhoods of Barrio Logan, Logan Heights, and Sherman Heights in San Diego, local industries spew three million pounds of toxic pollution into the air every year. These neighborhoods account for little more than two percent of the population of San Diego County, but more than a third of the County's hazardous wastes are generated or stored there, some 32 million pounds per year. Twenty-eight percent of Latino children in these neighborhoods (and those adjacent to them in Southeast San Diego) have been diagnosed with probable or possible asthma—about four times the national average ("Air Salta" 5; "Environmental Racism" 5).

Impoverished African American children in cities across the country live in dwellings with lead-based paint on interior and exterior walls, exposing them to the dangers of developing toxic levels of lead in their bloodstreams. National studies reveal that poor black children have a far greater degree of contracting lead poisoning than poor white children. Among the working poor, black youths are three times as likely to develop lead poisoning compared to their white counterparts (Bullard 21). Medical authorities in St. Louis in 1998 discovered 1,833 new cases of childhood lead poisoning, and estimated that somewhere between twenty and twenty-five percent of local youths had toxic levels of lead in their bloodstreams—nearly six times the national average. In some black neighborhoods the figure was closer to forty percent. Yet the city of St. Louis has only enough money to screen fewer than half of the children who need to be tested every year. Rather than detoxify lead-filled environments by removing and replacing window and door frames with lead based paint before children get sick, the city of St. Louis, in effect, uses black and poor white children's bodies as lead detectors, cleaning up the environment only after they have contracted the disease (Higgins 17).

Race-based campaigns for environmental justice draw their distinctly racialized dimensions from the unmistakably racialized nature of environmental injuries. They draw upon the organic

solidarity that exists among people who experience oppression in the same ways, who recognize that they face a common condition because of their color. But this grounding in organic solidarity also leads the way toward connecting ideologies capable of building collective struggle with members of other groups. Just as the identification of environmental racism encourages pan-ethnic solidarity for members of any one racial group, it also discourages dis-identification and inter-group competition among communities of color. White supremacy in the United States no longer works through simple exclusion, it also entails pitting communities of color against each other, attempting to persuade each aggrieved group that it can make gains only at the expense of other people of color. The environmental justice movement, however, unites diverse communities, because white supremacy impose similar (although not identical) burdens on all racialized groups, and consequently make it possible for members of those groups to see affinities, affiliations, and families of resemblance with other people of color.

At the same time, while grounded in an explicitly anti-racist frame, the environmental justice movement can never be only about color. Its environmental critique calls for new ways of organizing work, developing resources, and planning spatial relations. Unlike the old identity-based “civil rights” movements that too often settled for placing “dark faces in high places” (Gill 157), the environmental justice movement pursues priorities more subversive to the rule of capital than simply desegregating the ranks of the pain inflictors of this world.<sup>1</sup>

The environmental justice movement is about culture as well as about color. To succeed, it needs to give a politicized meaning to racial identities, to produce people who draw their identities from their politics rather than their politics from their identities. Yet it cannot do so by ignoring race. Instead it must speak so specifically to racial injuries that it educates its members about the way race functions in the U.S. today, not as an aberrant instance of social injustice in an otherwise fair and equal society, but rather as the key crucible where inequality is learned, legitimated, and naturalized.

Race-based movements come into existence when aggrieved populations turn negative ascription into positive affirmation. Racism can be a great organizing impetus: when diverse people are all subordinated because of their race, the experiences that they share build close bonds. Common experiences make solidarity seem organic, natural, and necessary. Yet this organic solidarity can lead to essentialism; to a belief that the racial categories invented by the oppressor are real, and moreover, that they form the only possible source of solidarity. This kind of race-based thinking, so common in nationalist groups, suppresses the plurality of the group and subordinates the non-racial aspects of identity—class, gender, language, religion, sexuality, etc.—to a lesser sphere. It encourages racial groups to disown and dis-identify with non-normative members of their own communities (Shah 224-44). Yet no one lives his or her life solely as a racial subject: at different times in a life race might

mean everything or it might mean nothing. When police officers routinely harass black motorists simply because they are black, all blacks are likely to be concerned. But black women and black gays and lesbians might find that on issues of domestic violence or homophobia their allies include members of other racial groups and that the ranks of their enemies include other African Americans.

The identities generated in and around recent struggles for environmental justice in Richmond, California prove that identities can be both fixed and fluid. People who share the same racial or political identity are never actually identical, but they may decide tactically at any given moment that the experiences that unite them are more important than those that divide them. Yet the same identities that generate one kind of organic solidarity can obscure the ways in which power works, especially the ways in which raced identities never exist in isolation from other hierarchies. The coalition leading anti-racist efforts in Richmond includes the West County Toxics Coalition, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, and the Laotian Organizing Project. These groups acknowledge racial identities in order to build organic solidarity and to speak honestly to injuries that are specifically racial in nature. But they do not settle for a politics based on embodied identity; instead, they give a political meaning to identities in order to encourage people to base their identities on their politics.

In the city of Richmond, oil refineries, waste incinerators, and factories producing pesticide, fertilizer, and other chemical products pollute the air, land, and water. The population of the neighborhoods adjacent to Richmond's industries is 48.8 percent African American; 26.9 percent white; 8.2 percent Asian or Pacific Islander; 0.8 percent Native American; and 15.3 percent "other" including Chicanos and Arabs. The area has experienced 35 major industrial accidents and thousands of minor incidents between 1989 and 1999, a deadly series of explosions, oil spills, chemical leaks, fires, and releases of toxic gases. The Chevron Oil refinery in Richmond stores more than 11 million pounds of corrosive, toxic, and explosive chemicals in sites near residential neighborhoods. The plant had more than 300 accidents between 1989 and 1995 ("Environmental Justice Case Study").

The size of the Laotian population of Richmond and San Pablo, California increased by over ten times between 1980 and 1990. For Laotian families accustomed to subsistence fishing and gardening, the air, water, and land polluted with mercury, dioxin, and polychlorinated biphenyls in their new neighborhoods held dreadful health risks (Tai 190-91). The linguistically-isolated and economically-impoorished Laotian American community in Richmond faced harsh conditions. Their traumatic history of war in their home country, followed by refuge and exile in the United States with few material resources at their disposal exposed them to an uninterrupted chain of hardship and misfortune. Immigrant women in the group developed one of the highest percentages of breast cancer among any group in California, while industrial accidents and toxic

discharges imperiled the health of senior citizens and youths alike. They even experienced a rash of hate crimes against their community committed by African Americans who resented their presence in one of the few territorial spaces in the area that seemed under the control of black people (Reed A13).

Yet anti-racist organizing help change the ways that race was experienced in Contra Costa County. Asian American feminists led by Peggy Saika of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network launched an organizing project to mobilize Laotian Americans. They made special efforts to involve immigrant daughters in their efforts, providing leadership training for them through the Laotian Youth Project. APEN made an alliance with Henry Clark and the predominately African American West County Toxic Coalition. They invited blacks and Laotians to join together to fight for better health care, less pollution, and multi-lingual warning signs and phone links about toxic accidents.

Drawing on a long history of African American activism in Richmond, more than 1,000 local residents had already organized the West County Toxics Coalition in 1986.<sup>2</sup> Under the leadership of Henry Clark, the group targeted the Chevron Corporation, the largest and wealthiest employer in Richmond. Chevron would be a formidable foe, but its very size guaranteed that it could withstand challenges and implement reforms without having to close down and take jobs away from Richmond. Moreover, the company has a high public profile, spending large sums of money every year on advertising proclaiming the firm's commitment to the environment. One representative set of advertisements asked "Do people care about the environment" and then replying to its own question announced "People do," followed by a description of Chevron's charitable donations and business practices that might be considered environmentally conscious.

When Chevron managers refused to repair equipment or shut down older equipment, the Coalition responded through public pressure. Picket signs carried by Coalition members inverted the corporation's advertising slogan by asking "Do people destroy the environment? People do." The group forged alliances with public-spirited scientists and attorneys who gave them technical and legal advice free of charge. Mass mobilizations, letter-writing and telephone campaigns, and demonstrations at meetings of the Richmond city planning council secured that body's support for a proposal requiring Chevron to put 50 million dollars into a community development fund to offset the negative impact that its activities had on the local environment. The city council—many of whose members received electoral campaign contributions from Chevron—overturned the planning council's decision, but the Coalition nonetheless negotiated an agreement with Chevron in 1994 that secured five million dollars for safety improvements at the Chevron plant, the establishment of a community health center, pollution prevention measures, community beautification projects, and job training programs for local residents. In 1996, the Coalition waged a campaign that included sending 1500 letters to the California Environmental Protection Agency to



protest the continuing hazards posed to their community by one of Chevron's incinerators. Stung by the ensuing bad publicity, Chevron announced that it would shut down the incinerator within a year ("Environmental Justice Case Study").

Although led by African Americans and rooted in the historical struggles of that community, the West County Toxics Coalition included members of other groups, most notably the Asian Pacific Environmental Network's (APEN) Laotian Organizing Project and Youth Initiative. Started in 1995, this organizing campaign sought to encouraging immigrant youths to take leadership roles in their community's struggles for health, well-being, and human rights. Forced to live near toxic hazards because of racial segregation and their own poverty, Laotian immigrants suffer from Richmond's pollution as much or more than any other group. Their traditional modes of subsistence brought with them from Laos often expose them to unexpected dangers in North America. They cultivate vegetables in contaminated soil and catch fish from polluted waters, while their cultural and social isolation leaves them less aware than long time residents of the dangers they face from air polluted by toxic emissions. Laotian immigrant women have the highest rate of deaths from breast cancer of any group in Contra Costa County (Parr 1).

Feminist activists from the Asian Pacific Environmental Network started the Laotian Organizing Project as a means of connecting second and third generation descendants of older immigrant groups (Japanese and Chinese) with the most aggrieved groups of new immigrants from Southeast Asia. They also hoped that an organized project aimed at "Laotians" might help unite a community whose members often had more allegiance to ethnic identities as Hmong, Lao, Mien, or Khmu than to their national identities as Laotians. The APEN organizers also hoped to combine feminism as well as environmentalism with race-based activism by cultivating the leadership capacities of teenage women in immigrant households who often find themselves placed in roles as mediators between their ethnic communities and social institutions such as schools, police departments, and social welfare agencies. Daughters in Asian immigrant families often find themselves caught between cultures, dismissed as too quiet and family-centered at school yet chastised for being too loud and "American" at home.

Environmental justice activism with the West County Toxics Coalition opened up new roles and identities for the young women targeted by APEN's Laotian Organizing Project. They became "women of color" in the West County Toxics Coalition, an identity that emphasized their shared subordination by race and class with African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans. Within the activities of APEN they became "Asian Americans," part of a pan-ethnic coalition of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants from Asia whose many different nationalities, languages, and religions become temporarily put aside in order to respond to the prevalence in the U.S. of "Asian lumping" whereby whites treat all immigrants from Asia as a unified (and largely unwanted) ethnic

group. As activists with the Laotian Organizing Project they helped construct a unified “Laotian” identity that temporarily suspended the diversity of a population that included migrants from rural areas and from cities, immigrant workers and immigrant capitalists, followers of different religions, and members of ethnic groups with long histories of mutual antagonism in Laos. Encouragement from Asian American feminists from APEN also encouraged these young women to inhabit a gender identity as women that challenged the norms of both their patriarchal families and their sexist peer groups at school. Fam Linh Saechao, recruited to the project when she was 13, explains “APEN gives us a place where we can come together and identify as Asian women. It gives us a place to be both Laotian and American, some kind of middle ground to talk about the struggles we have with our families, no matter if we are Lao, Mien, Hmong, or Khmu” (Parr 1).

Young women like Fam Linh Saechao do not have to choose one overarching identity; they can be women of color, Asian Americans, feminists, Laotians, Americans, environmental activists, students, immigrant daughters, and members of distinct ethnic groups all at once. Each identity provides its own optic on power, its own epistemology, and its own basis for alliance and affiliation. Solidarity based on identity is limited, but solidarities based on identities are unlimited (Sandoval 183; Lowe 317).

The Wolf River Watershed Education Project offers another exemplary environmental justice struggle. In Wisconsin during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Native American activists fashioned an alliance with environmentalists, human rights advocates, and even with former white supremacists who had previously been bitter opponents of Native American Treaty Rights to defeat the efforts by the Noranda and Exxon Corporations to expand mining activities in Northern Wisconsin.

Many of the people who became prominent in the WWEP’s campaigns in the mid and late 1990s had been bitter enemies a decade earlier. During a period of economic downturn in rural areas in the late 1980s, white supremacist organizers convinced a significant number of the local sport fishers, entrepreneurs, and workers in the tourist industry that the area’s decline stemmed from a shortage of fish caused by overfishing by Ojibwe Indians. The Native Americans actually fished very carefully—never taking more than three percent of the fish in northern Wisconsin. The region’s decline had nothing to do with spearfishing, but everything to do with neo-liberalism, globalization, the evisceration of the welfare state, and capital flight from rural areas like Northern Wisconsin toward even more exploited and impoverished regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Treaties between the federal government and Wisconsin’s Indian nations in 1837 and 1842 relegated Native Americans to reservation land and opened up the rest of the region to white settlement.<sup>3</sup> These treaties stipulated that Indians retained the right to use natural resources on lands in traditional ways—to cultivate wild rice and medicinal plants, to hunt game, and to fish. Most of these rights

were unilaterally abrogated by subsequent legislative and judicial actions by whites. Spearfishing by the Ojibwe only resumed as a result of a federal court order in 1983—one hundred and forty years after they had been guaranteed by treaty. Anti-Indian activists argued that the treaty rights gave Indians “special privileges” and that these privileges disadvantaged whites. They demanded an end to Indian spearfishing (of course without offering to return the state of Wisconsin to the Indians), using legitimate political means to pressure elected officials but also resorting to vigilante actions, mob violence, terror, and intimidation.

The white supremacists attempted to use anti-Indian resentment as the basis for constructing a historical bloc, using the language of equal rights pioneered by the civil rights movement to unite aggrieved whites against even poorer Indians. Paul Mulalley of Hayward, Wisconsin was arrested for carrying an uncased hunting gun, and then claimed that Indians enjoyed the privilege of not being arrested for violating state law. As a result, he started an organization that he named Equal Rights for Everybody (ERFE). Larry Peterson of Rhinelander, Wisconsin co-opted the rhetoric of the environmental movement in starting his white supremacist group—the Wisconsin Alliance for Rights and Resources. The acronym of his group—WARR—foregrounded heroic military masculinity as an identity capable of erasing the shame of rural poverty. A third group, Protect Americans’ Rights and Resources (PARR) blended civil rights, environmental, and national chauvinist traditions. Some of these groups were more open about their white supremacist beliefs than others, but they worked together as part of a reticulated web to echo each other and augment the legitimacy of their cause by giving the appearance of having a broad and popular base.

The anti-Indian organizations attributed Northern Wisconsin’s economic problems to reckless practices among Native Americans. This appealed to long entrenched prejudices against Indians while resonating at the same time with the contemporary national discourse of “white injury” that blamed the “special privileges” given to minorities as a result of the civil rights movement for the social and economic dislocations of neo-liberalism and globalization. What Ghassen Hage terms “the psychopathology of white decline” offered downwardly mobile whites a convenient scapegoat for their anger, while hiding from them the identity of their real enemy (Hage 9; Lipsitz 69-98). These impulses found reinforcement at the highest levels of government during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, both of whom showed contempt for demands that civil rights laws be rigorously enforced while caricaturing members of minority groups as lazy, criminal, and welfare-dependent.

During the anti-spearfishing campaigns, white supremacists presented themselves as defenders of the environment against the “reckless” practices of native peoples. One sign wielded by members of a mob attempting to intimidate Ojibwe spearfishers referred to the alleged scarce supply of a favorite local fish, and counseled “Save a Walleye: Spear an Indian.” Others threw bottles,

rocks, and full beer cans at Native Americans and attacked Ojibwe boats with sniper fire, metal ball bearings, and pipe bombs (Grossman and McNutt 23). Signs and slogans prominent in their activities and displayed during attacks on indigenous spearfishers ridiculed the Indians as “timber niggers,” “spearchuckers,” and “welfare warriors.” Environmental appeals became fused with appeals to brutality and even murder in signs proclaiming “Shoot an Indian, Save 25 Deer.” Moreover the national moral panic over inner city crime proved useful to rural white supremacists who claimed that protections offered Indians by treaty rights had turned Indian reservations into havens for crime and drugs.

The anti-Treaty forces fused longstanding anti-Indian racism with contradictory elements of the reigning conservative moral panics about crime and welfare as well as liberal commitments to “equal rights” and the environment. Through violent direct action, extensive propaganda campaigns, and political pressure, they sought to channel the rage of working class and middle class white workers against economic restructuring into a crusade for white privilege. Oneida poet Roberta Hill (Whiteman) recalls the brazenness of anti-Indian racism at the peak of the anti-spearfishing protests. In her poem, “Preguntas” she notes, “In my home state, in Medford, Wisconsin, there is a bounty for brown women like me” (5-7). Referring to a sign she saw posted in a local store parodying the Turkey Shoots in small towns (at which marksmen firing rifles are awarded Thanksgiving turkeys for hitting a target), Whiteman writes, “The sign at the local pizzeria announces ‘The First Annual Indian Shoot’” (8). Feeling this hatred of her people deep in her bones, Whiteman says, “I felt the bones in my fingers and I scuffed them across the sign. “‘It is not the first,’ the right fingerbones sang. ‘It has never been annual’ the left ones added” (9-13).

Yet leaders of Native American groups did not accept the binary oppositions at the core of their opponents’ politics. Walter Bresette, spokesperson for the Red Cliff Lake Ojibwe tribe viewed the leaders and followers in ERFE, WARR, and PARR as misguided but capable of coming to other conclusions. Although of course he felt that the way they formulated their grievances was incorrect, Bresette recognized that the white supremacists had real complaints. He explained:

The protesters were indeed threatened and their lifestyle was imperiled, but it was not the Chippewa who posed the threat. European Americans were victims of failed or nonexistent economic and environmental policies. They were victims of educational institutions that left them socially and historically illiterate. And, they were victims of new interests finding their way into the north-land. (Whaley and Bresette 88)

Even at the apex of white supremacist hysteria, some Native American leaders, firm in their fidelity to exercising treaty rights, also saw the possibilities for affiliation with their enemies. Bresette observed in the heat of the battles of the early 1990s, “We have

more in common with the anti-Indian people than we do with the state of Wisconsin" (Grossman and McNutt 23). Sport fishers, entrepreneurs, and workers in the tourist industry needed a sound environment and a strong economy in the region just as Indians did. It was the state and its corporate backers who were responsible for depleting resources and diminishing the quality of life. The challenge that Bresette and other indigenous leaders faced was how to make those common interests clear to their enemies, how to rearrange the dominant historical bloc so that they could struggle for hegemony with, rather than against white workers.

The answer came through struggle and organizational learning. It came from the spread of new ideas that accompanied cultures of struggle. By necessity, this struggle initially pitted Native Americans and their supporters against their white supremacist opponents. The Midwest Treaty Network emerged from the fights over spearfishing. It began as a coalition between Indian and non-Indian supporters of tribal sovereignty and treaty rights.<sup>4</sup> They mobilized some 2,000 "witnesses" trained in non-violence to accompany Ojibwe spearfishers, document violent acts, and where possible, promote reconciliation. Defending treaty rights and helping to organize the Midwest Treaty Network offered important lessons to Indian activists about organizing and mobilizing for social change, lessons that would prove invaluable in the next phase of the struggle.

In 1994, the Noranda Corporation (a Canadian firm) attempted to open a zinc and silver open-pit mine in Oneida County. The Lac de Flambeau Ojibwe nation joined with white environmentalists to oppose the project because of the damage it would do to local wetlands. In 1995, another mining project led the Midwest Treaty Network to start the Wolf River Watershed Educational Project, which soon became a grass roots alliance of Native Americans, environmental activists, and sportfishing enthusiasts—including some of those who had followed white supremacists five years earlier. They mobilized to oppose plans by the Exxon Corporation to open a sulfide mine at a site one mile away from the wild rice beds of the Mole Lake Ojibwe people, five miles from the trout-filled Wolf River flowing through the Menominee Nation, and also five miles downwind from a reservation inhabited by the Potawatomi tribe.

The group organized rallies and speaking tours in support of a legislative act placing a moratorium on new mining in their part of the state. It created alliances with factory workers in Kenosha and Racine and with students and professionals in the state capitol city of Madison. Chris Nisan, leader of the Africana Student Union at the University of Minnesota traveled to the Wisconsin backwoods to tell a rally "The regular niggers is here to help the timber niggers" (Whaley and Bresette 141). Despite a \$2 million advertising and lobbying campaign by Exxon, the Wolf River Watershed Educational Project succeeded in getting their bill passed by the legislature. The Project built on that success through another successful legislative campaign, this time resulting in banning the use of cyanide in mining (Grossman and McNutt 23-24).

The Wolf Watershed Educational Project brought together a broad coalition to pursue common aims. But it could not have done so without addressing the issue of race. Most of the Native American leaders who guided the Wolf Watershed Educational Project to success in the late 1990s relied on the things they had learned through the race specific mobilizations on behalf of their treaty rights a decade earlier. Part of this emphasis was strategic: treaty rights give Native groups automatic legal standing to sue in federal court over environmental issues, a standing not always extended to other citizens groups by judges predisposed to the corporate agenda. Part of this emphasis, however, was philosophical. The white supremacists of the early 1990s had taught the WWEP how white supremacy worked, how it prevented white workers from identifying their own class interests. They recognized that white supremacy is the default position in U.S. society, that race does not go away simply because it is not mentioned. They gambled that white workers would be willing to join with a movement that was explicitly anti-racist in the course of also being pro-environment and anti-corporate: that one political/racial identity could be traded for another more productive one.

Walter Bresette discerned the unpredictable possibilities in the composite identity of his enemies in part because of his appreciation of the diverse identities that he valued in himself. He attributed his ability to lead to his appreciation of his ability to learn, and grow, and change throughout his life. His stance as an activist had many different origins. He grew up in a largely Indian community, admiring the outspokenness of his mother's sister Toddy (Victoria Gokee), one of the first women to serve as a tribal chief in Wisconsin. She taught him lessons about activism "in her kitchen" (Whaley and Bresette 70-71). Yet Bresette knew little about his own background, about the history of native peoples, about their contemporary conditions. He found that people off the reservation and outside Indian communities provided him with crucial contacts, incentives, and resources that enabled him to learn what he wanted his Indian identity to mean.

A European American teacher, Veda Stone, opened doors to Bresette by inviting him to participate in a summer education program for 12 and 13 year-olds at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. At that institute Bresette first met Clyde Warrior who would go on to be an important activist in the American Indian Movement and who had a way of being Indian that commanded respect and inspired Bresette (Whaley and Bresette 71). Similarly, the U.S. government's relocation program that aimed to destroy Native cultures by moving Indians off reservations and into cities enabled Bresette to move to Chicago. But like other urbanized Indians, he did not move into a homogenous undifferentiated "American" culture, but rather to the Uptown neighborhood in Chicago—an urban area that he could afford to live in, one populated by Appalachian whites, African Americans, migrants from the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, and later, refugees from Asia. In this multiethnic space, Bresette found opportunities for unexpected affiliations,

identifications, and alliances. When police officers arrested him for participating in a public drum ceremony, Bresette got bailed out by African American neighborhood activists from the Black Panther Party and Operation Breadbasket. Seeing the power of racial solidarity among blacks—and embarrassed because he had not been able to answer a reporter's questions about Indians during a demonstration on behalf of a Menominee mother with nine children who had been evicted from her Uptown apartment—Bresette resolved to learn more about his culture, leading him to participate in education and action campaigns with members of other tribes. A lonely and cold vigil at the Wisconsin State capitol building in 1974 to support the Menominee takeover of an unused Alexian Brothers Abbey near their reservation in Gresham, Wisconsin motivated Bresette to learn more about his own tribe and to become more involved in their activities. Feeling “strangely composite” (to use Gramsci's term) caused Bresette difficulties, but it also enabled him to savor the dynamics of difference, to appreciate how struggle itself produced unpredictable kinds of organizational learning with emancipatory possibilities (Whaley and Bresette 73-74).

Bresette also learned not to write people off simply because they participated in hegemonic institutions, organizations, and activities. His life trajectory had taken him into the U.S. military, where he had conducted electronic surveillance in Japan. He had been the recipient of a Bureau of Indian Affairs grant to study advertising art once his military service had been concluded. Army intelligence and advertising agencies could hardly be construed as allies of native people, but the skills Bresette developed in both of those institutions proved valuable to his activist work once the right opportunities came his way.

The strangely composite composition of his enemies' ideology that had fueled their coalition initially, later came back to haunt them. White supremacist agitators attracted a large following in the campaigns against spearfishing by combining environmental, civil rights, and military images, but they lost credibility quickly with their core constituency when they displayed little taste for protecting the environment when it meant taking on mining companies and other corporate predators rather than just Indian spearfishers. Most important, Native American victories in the early 1990s made it clear that any coalition between Native and non—Natives would have to be a coalition among equals (Grossman and McNutt 22-25).

The Midwest Treaty Network and the Wolf Watershed Education Project demonstrate the significance of race-specific organizing—the imperative not to surrender all racial arguments to the other side. Expressly white supremacist concerns diverted the attention of whites in northern Wisconsin away from neo-liberalism and corporate plunder. In defending themselves from racist attacks, Native American activists in Wisconsin developed effective solidarity networks. But they also formulated a pro-environment and pro-Indian politics that eventually won over their enemies and enabled them to play a leading role in an inter-racial coalition.

The most important victories secured by the WWEP came from electoral ballot propositions that precluded and delayed mineral extraction in northern Wisconsin. Unable to overturn the capitalist system, they nonetheless recognized that they could procure real concessions from their enemies because the state needed to preserve legitimacy in the eyes of the governed. Their struggle could be condemned as reformist and melioristic, but in Gramsci's terms it exemplified the importance of the war of position rather than the war of maneuver. As Stuart Hall writes about Gramsci's approach to the state:

In this reading, it [the state] becomes not a thing to be seized, overthrown, or 'smashed' with a single blow, but a complex formation in modern societies which must become the focus of a number of different strategies and struggles because it is an arena of different social contestations. (Hall 429)

In order to fashion electoral victories and to facilitate the kinds of organizational learning that they promote, the WWEP had to imagine and enact unexpected alliances and affiliations. They had to see the common concerns that might unite Native Americans, white supremacists, environmentalists, factory workers, pacifists, students, and suburban residents. Solidarities based on sameness proved too narrow for that task. Instead, they had to fashion coalitions based on the dynamics of difference. As Bresette explained:

We ally not because we are 'alike' nor to remake each other or to force compromise or correct tactics. We ally to affirm each other's strengths and to call upon that which we need but don't have ourselves. If we are to build even stronger alliances for our common goals, we must accommodate and encourage our personal and cultural differences, while tolerating our natural weaknesses, and thereby solidify our political partnerships. (Whaley and Bresette 85)

Struggles for environmental justice as a form of ethnogenesis (group making) and progressive politics are not confined to the United States. Concerns about biodiversity and ecotourism have played important roles in shaping the nature of "black" identity in Colombia. As Arturo Escobar notes, for Afro-Colombian environmental justice activists, their racial identity is defined less by color than by "a cultural logic and worldview rooted in black experience" that goes beyond demands for equality, equivalence, and interchangeability to instead affirm the right "to construct their own vision of the future, development, and social organization" (Escobar 215). Environmental justice campaigns may have special relevance, however, in a nation as shaped by racialization as the U.S. Activists have learned from bitter experience that all struggles for social justice in the U.S. ignore race at their peril and will not succeed unless they develop particularly sophisticated understandings of its role as a social force. While only one of many new forms of struggle emerging from dramatically new and depressingly old



oppressions and inequalities, the environmental justice movement offers valuable lessons about the nature of power and the dynamics of social struggle.

The struggle for a safe and healthy environment seems like a cause that should engage the energies all people, regardless of social position. Everyone breathes air, drinks water, and eats food. No matter how divided we may be by race, class, gender, nationality, or sexual identification, we are connected by the possibility of contracting communicable diseases. Debilitating illnesses prevent people from contributing to society. They lower productivity and increase the costs of insurance. Environmental pollution is one instance where an injury to one really is an injury to all.

Yet we do not bear the collective burdens of environmental degradation equally. Some people profit from poisoning others. They secure safer and healthier environments for themselves, forcing others to suffer the pain produced by their pursuit of wealth. Environmental pollution can actually produce new sources of profit by increasing the value of residences and workplaces located far away from the greatest concentrations of pollution.

For hundreds of years, emancipatory projects have revolved around universality, equivalence, interchangeability, and equality. From the universal abstract citizen/subject of bourgeois democracy to the universal worker as the primary agent of social change within marxism, social movement strategies and theories have encouraged us to seek justice in those sites where we appear to be most the same. Post-structuralists, on the other hand, have emphasized difference rather than unity, particularity rather than universality. This is an appropriate strategy in a world where the hegemonic power of capital does not make us all the same, but instead generates seemingly endless new form of difference, inequality, and incommensurability. Yet how can we prevent local particularisms from degenerating into selfish internecine rivalries? How can we prevent appeals based on equivalence and interchangeability from masking real historical, social, and political differences?

The environmental justice movement demonstrates that we do not need to make a choice between what Aime Cesaire so aptly termed a narrow particularism and a disembodied universalism. Indeed, in our interconnected world, there is no "universal" that is not actually the project of some dominant particular, and there is no "particular" that exists outside of the totality of social relations.

The environmental justice movement faces many daunting problems. It is not easy to balance the specific concerns of each racial group within a pan-ethnic alliance. It is even more difficult to demonstrate to a diverse constituency that their immediate problems stem from systemic structural causes. New social movement strategies have enabled environmental justice adherents to develop ingenious and effective strategies, but it remains to be seen if in the long run they will be an effective counter to the massive power and resources of corporations and the state. Yet by developing new politics about identity and new political identities, the environmental justice movements offers a possibility of realizing Aime Cesaire's

vision of struggles for justice based on “a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are,” in order to accelerate “the deepening of each particular” and “the coexistence of them all” (Cesaire 14-15).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scholar and civil rights activist Vincent Harding is the originator of this phrase which encapsulates the difference between the reformist and the radical implications of the movement.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of black activism in Richmond see Shirley Wilson Moore.

<sup>3</sup> Treaty-breaking by whites and anti-Indian racism are not restricted to Wisconsin. See for example Michael P. Rogin.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, contact Midwest Treaty Network, South/Central Wisconsin Office, P.O. Box 14382, Madison, WI 53174-3482. [mtn@igc.apc.org](mailto:mtn@igc.apc.org) Webpage [www.treatyland.com](http://www.treatyland.com) and Menominee Nation Treaty Rights and Mining Impacts, P.O. Box 910, Keshena, WI 54135 and [menominee.com/nomining/tn81398b.html](http://menominee.com/nomining/tn81398b.html).

## Works Cited

- “Air Salta: Taking a Stand for Clean Air Through Community Organizing” *Toxinformer* 19.2 (2000): 5.
- Brown, Elaine. *A Taste of Power*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
- Bullard, Robert D. “Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement.” *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices From the Grass Roots*. Ed. Robert D. Bullard. Boston: South End, 1993. 15-40.
- . “Environmental Justice For All.” *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. Ed. Robert D. Bullard. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994.
- Cesaire, Aime. *A Letter to Maurice Thorez*. Paris: Presence Africaine, 1957.
- “Children’s Environmental Health Activities.” *Asian Pacific Environmental Network*. IGC. 24 Nov. 2006 <[www.igc.org/envjustice/training/apen.html](http://www.igc.org/envjustice/training/apen.html)>.
- Churchill, Ward. *A Little Matter of Genocide*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1997.
- Cole, Luke and Sheila Foster. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: New York UP, 2001. 26.
- Edelman, Marian Wright. “A Healthy Start on the Act to Leave No Child Behind.” *Chicago Defender* 20 June 2001: 11.
- “Environmental Justice Case Study: West County Toxics Coalition and the Chevron Refinery.” *Richmond Justice Page*. Scott Sherman. 26 Nov. 2006 <[www.umich.edu/~snre492/sherman.html](http://www.umich.edu/~snre492/sherman.html)>.
- “Environmental Racism.” *Toxinformer* 19.1 January 2000: 5.

- Escobar, Arturo. "Cultural Politics and Biological Diversity: State, Capital, and Social Movements in the Pacific Coast of Colombia." *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. 201-26.
- Foo, Lora Jo. *Asian American Women: Issues, Concerns, and Responsive Human and Civil Rights Advocacy*. New York: Ford Foundation, 2002.
- Gill, Gerald. "From Progressive Republican to Independent Progressive: The Career of Charlotta A. Bass." Eds. Ann D. Gordon with Bettye Collier Thomas, John Bracey, Arlene Voski Avakian, and Joyce Averich Berkman. *African American Women and the Vote: 1837-1965*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997.
- Grossman, Zoltan and Debra McNutt. "From Enemies to Allies." *Color Lines* (Spring 2001): 22-25.
- Guzman, Pablo. "The Party." *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings: An Anthology*. Ed. Robert Santiago. New York: Ballantine Books, 1995.
- Hage, Ghassan. *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. New York and London: Routledge, 2000.
- Hall, Stuart. "Gramsci's Relevance for Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. London: Routledge, 1996. 429.
- Higgins, Laura. "The Lead Menace." *Riverfront Times* 12-18 April 2000: 17.
- Hilliard, David and Lewis Cole. *This Side of Glory*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1993.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. "A Poetics of Anticolonialism." *Introduction to Aime Cesaire, Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.
- Landsberg, Mitchell. "Wide Ethnic Disparities Found in County." *Los Angeles Times* 25 July 2000: B7.
- Lee, Charles. "Beyond Toxic Wastes and Race." *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices From the Grass Roots*. Ed. Robert D. Bullard. Boston: South End, 1993. 41-52.
- Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.
- Lowe, Lisa. "Interview with Angela Davis." *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. 303-23.
- Moore, Shirley Wilson. *To Place Our Deeds: African Americans in Richmond, California, 1910-1963*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001.
- Morales, Iris. "Palante, Siempre Palante." *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices From the Diaspora*. Eds. Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.
- Ogbar, Jeffrey. "Puerto Rico en mi Corazon: The Young Lords, Black Power, and Puerto Rican Nationalism in the U.S., 1966-1972." *Centro Journal* 18.1 (Fall 2006): 148-69.
- Parr, Josh. "Young Laotian Women Build A Bridge in Richmond." *Shades of Power* 1.4: 1.
- Pulido, Laura. *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1996.

- . "Multiracial Organizing Among Environmental Justice Activists in Los Angeles." *Rethinking Los Angeles*. Eds. Michael Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996. 171-89.
- Reed, Dan. "Laotians Greeted by Violence in Contra Costa: Hard Times, Cultural Differences and Racism Blamed." *San Francisco Chronicle* 8 Sept. 1991: A13.
- Rogin, Michael P. *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian*. New York: Knopf, 1975.
- Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Shields, David L.L. "What Color is Hunger?" *The Color of Hunger: Race and Hunger in National and International Perspective*. Ed. David L.L. Shields. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 1995. 1-11.
- Smith, Paul Chaat and Robert Warrior. *Like A Hurricane*. New York: New Press, 1996.
- Sze, Julie. "Expanding Environmental Justice: Asian American Feminist Contributions." *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire*. Ed. Sonia Shah. Boston: South End, 1997. 90-99.
- Tai, Stephanie. "Recent Development: Environmental Hazards and the Richmond Laotian American Community: A Case Study in Environmental Justice." *Asian Law Journal*. 6 May 1999.
- Touraine, Alain. *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- Wenz, Peter S. "Just Garbage." *Faces of Environmental Racism; Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. Eds. Laura Westra and Peter S. Wenz. Boston: South End, 1993. 57-62.
- Whaley, Rick and Walter Bresette. *Walleye Warrior: An Effective Alliance Against Racism and For the Earth*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1994.
- Whiteman, Roberta Hill. *Philadelphia Flowers: Poems by Roberta Hill Whiteman*. Duluth, Minnesota: Holy Cow Press, 1996.