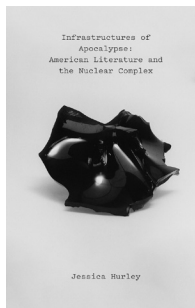


Review Essay

New “Movement of Movements” in American Studies and Environmental Justice

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Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger. By Julie Sze. Berkeley: University of California, 2020.

Infrastructures of Apocalypse: American Literature and the Nuclear Complex. By Jessica Hurley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

In *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (2001), George Lipsitz argues “the history of American Studies is the history of successive social movements” (XVI). For Lipsitz and American studies, “academic struggles over meaning are always connected in crucial ways to social movement struggles over resources and power” (XV-XVI). How then has the rise of the environmental and climate justice movement influenced American studies, and how is American studies scholarship making meaning alongside the grassroots movements against environmental racism and other intersectional forms of environmental violence?

In *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (2020), Julie Sze writes that “American studies is one ideal, albeit uncomfortable, home for environmental justice.” As both a social movement and an interdisciplinary field of study, environmental justice (EJ) is considerably newer than American studies. And yet one reason American studies is an ideal/uncomfortable home for EJ is that American

studies was in some respects slow to train its attention as a field towards issues of environmental racism (the initial focus of U.S.-based EJ activists), while at the same time environmental justice scholarship was slow to employ qualitative and humanist methods common to American studies. As a field, environmental justice began in sociology and critical geography: early papers and books by Robert Bullard, Paul Mohai, and others established the academic alliance with grassroots activists seeking to map and measure the disproportionate environmental risks and burdens communities of color faced in the U.S. compared to white and wealthy communities. The first academic conference focused on environmental justice was held among a small group of mostly sociologists at University of Michigan in 1990, over a decade before Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein published, in 2002, *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy* (to which Sze supplied a field-defining chapter on literary analysis of environmental justice). Arguably the first American studies anthology to take up environmental justice, the *Environmental Justice Reader* highlights two critical dimensions of American studies engagement with environmental justice: 1) the privileging of direct testimony from grassroots communities experiencing and actively resisting environmental racism as a source of knowledge, and 2) the importance of using humanist inquiry to read counter hegemonic narratives within cultural texts that counter environmental racism and oppression.

The two books under review here, Julie Sze's *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* and Jessica Hurley's *Infrastructures of Apocalypse*, showcase the cutting edge of American studies engagement with environmental justice along these two dynamics long-resonant in this field. *Environmental Justice* highlights the activist knowledge and frontline wisdom of emblematic 21st grassroots resistance to extractivist, white supremacist, climate change-fueled environmental violence. Sze writes in service to the goals of EJ as movement, while Hurley's monograph shows how the wisdom of grassroots movements can lead scholars to productively re-read established narratives of American literature and popular culture through new perspectives.

Like virtually all of what David Pellow terms "critical environmental justice," both books are focused on the historical, structural, and narrative dimensions of environmental violence and the social movements (both political and artistic) that arise to resist this violence. If, as Sze argues, "environmental violence is baked into the history of the United States," then the scope of any study of environmental justice extends back in time well before the start of the EJ social movement to these violences as well as the social movements that fought them under different nomenclature. Jessica Hurley does this by applying aspects of environmental justice theory on the twentieth-century nuclear-industrial-complex's slow violence and the racialized, apocalyptic chronopolitics of the Cold War. And yet environmental justice as a field of study also remains focused on, to borrow the title from Robert Bullard's field-defining book, "confronting environmental racism" by hearing "voices from the grassroots."

Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger is the eleventh entry in the

University of California Press's *American Studies Now: Critical Histories of the Present* series. The series offers, in the words of the publisher, "concise, accessible, authoritative books on significant political debates... quickly, while such teachable moments are at the forefront of public consciousness." True to form, the chapters of *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* are organized around contemporary and unsettled environmental conflicts that many new to environmental justice or American studies would readily recognize: the Standing Rock Sioux and allies' stand against the routing of the North Dakota Access Pipeline, the government lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan's water, and the legacy of hurricane Katrina read against the more recent aftermath of Hurricane Maria, all feature as prominent case stories in this book. And like other entries in the *American Studies Now* series, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* has an almost manifesto-like feel in style and tone, rather than the more circumspect political valence most monographs (including Hurley's) possess. Sze also pays homage to Lipsitz beyond her book's title. In each chapter Sze addresses the productive insights and tensions American studies brings to environmental justice studies in analogous ways to Lipsitz situating ethnic studies with American studies in *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*.

An introduction and concluding chapter frame the three cases of *Environmental Justice*. In the introductory and first chapter, Sze describes the environmental justice movement as an intersectional "movement of movements" that has focused on "expanding social and racial justice in environmental terms (land, pollution, health)" (5). Noting that the structural forces of racism, capitalism, militarism, and colonialism that produce and sustain environmental risks and inequalities long predate the formation of the term "environmental justice," Sze's introduction charts how the social movement and academic study of environmental justice has evolved over the past forty years. Sze productively notes how EJ studies developed similarly to recent movements in American studies, notably in that both responded to liberation movements organized around intersectional aspects of identity and that each critically interrogate American exceptionalism. Sze ends her introduction by unpacking Eric Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," as a symbolic and material reality of political oppression, and how political oppression deploys environmental violence. While not conflating environmental violence and environmentalism with state violence, Sze shows how EJ scholarship contributes to American studies interrogations of the "many-hydra-headed beasts" of oppression directed against marginalized communities.

Sze's first body chapter, "This Movement of Movements," takes up the struggle against the North Dakota Access Pipeline route (#NoDAPL). While quick to note that theories of environmental racism are inadequate to address all issues of Indigenous land dispossession, sovereignty, and Indigenous land-based social movements, Sze persuasively presents Standing Rock as an emblematic case of environmental justice. Environmental justice defined as both the resistance to specific environmental violence and *in*justice, as well as environmental justice defined as new forms of community (often led by youth and women) pushing for

just transition away from extractive, polluting economic activities and oppressive political systems. Relying extensively on Indigenous scholars and activists involved directly in this internationally significant conflict, Sze outlines, on the one hand, how histories of land dispossession and environmental racism routed the risks of the pipeline away from majority-white Bismark towards the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. When the unprecedented coalition of self-described water protectors resisted the pipeline, Sze details how militarized police violence served as the industry's weapon against the water protectors. This is environmental justice as resistance to violence and oppression. But by describing the rhetoric, art, and transnational communities and alliances of the water protectors—including the Indigenous Environmental Network, the Movement for Black Lives and climate justice organization UPROSE—the #NoDAPL movement also exemplifies environmental justice as transformative political communities. Comprised of hundreds of different Indigenous nations from across North and South America, as well as anti-racist organizations and environmentalists, the #NoDAPL movement showcases how environmental justice is a “movement of movements.”

Sze's second chapter, “Environmental Justice Encounters,” shifts the focus away from issues of Indigenous sovereignty and land control to that of the anti-democratic governance that produced the environmental racism of Flint, Michigan. Sze maintains focus on this “movement of movements” by tracing how artists and activists connect #NoDAPL to the concurrent issue of “government-facilitated lead poisoning” in Flint, Michigan. While the events leading to the lead poisoning have been treated in numerous scholarly and popular press publications, Sze's reassessment of this familiar ground is useful in highlighting aspects of EJ struggles that are typical of many lesser-known instances of environmental racism. For example, while the residents of Flint knew immediately that something had gone wrong with their water, their experiential knowledge was largely dismissed or doubted by officials until knowledge was produced by proper experts. Sze turns to the pesticide poisoning of California's Central Valley, pointing to other instances of working-class communities of color identifying environmental harm while being ignored or dismissed after raising concerns. As in every environmental justice struggle, history matters. Sze traces the anti-democratic decisions of the emergency manager back to the financial management by state and federal officials long before 2015 (when the poisoning began), as well as a century before that when the lead industry successfully began efforts to regulate the toxin in consumer products and infrastructure. Against the common-sense hegemonic assumptions that guide officials and corporations, EJ activists in Flint, MI, and Visalia, CA marshal different forms of activist storytelling, and in so doing take democracy into their own hands.

The third chapter, “Restoring Environmental Justice” is dedicated to the affective and artistic dimensions undergirding all environmental justice struggles and the ways in which culture matters to issues of climate violence and just transition. Like the earlier EJ case studies in chapters one and two, Sze selects three well known climate justice case studies to anchor her analysis in chapter three. In this chapter,

however, Sze focuses her whole energy on the artistic productions that "generate hope in dark times" of climate injustice. Of course, she argues that distinguishing between grassroots activism and art is a false binary—and preceding chapters attend to artistic efforts made amidst activist communities (e.g. #HipHop4Flint, "Words for Water"). Likewise, while she touches on issues of affect and emotion in earlier chapters, in "Restoring Environmental Justice" Sze focuses on the need for emotional, epistemological, and narrative inventiveness in EJ movements. In each case study Sze demonstrates how disruptive climate violence generates both "monstrous" and "utopian" disruptions to established ways of thinking and relating to each other (96-97). Again, Sze's chapter in *The Environmental Justice Reader* was among the first scholarly arguments for ecocritical engagements with literature and affect in environmental justice scholarship. In the third chapter and short conclusion Sze extends her long scholarly engagement with these issues to argue that environmental justice art challenges the "death cult of whiteness, extraction, and violence through diverse voices, media, and perspectives" (100).

Sze's lean book also stands as a miniature state-of-the-field of American Studies as it has engaged with the environmental justice movement, offering a compelling summary of the different structural forces that produce and sustain the immense measures of environmental inequalities we observe in the U.S. and across the world. In doing so *Environmental Justice at a Moment of Danger* adds to the growing list of new EJ teaching texts and pedagogical resources seeking to expand conversations, such as *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, edited by Joni Adamson, David Pellow, and William Gleason, and *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader* (2018), by Christopher Well.

While certainly more accessible than many monographs, Sze's book does not shy away from engaging with robust theorizations of racialization, militarism, settler colonialism, and neoliberal capitalism. As such, *Environmental Justice* will likely find its most sympathetic audiences among the students of graduate coursework and those preparing for field examinations, or alternatively, scholars seeking to familiarize themselves with new areas of environmental justice research within the field of American studies. That said, Sze is able to write in a fairly high scholarly register throughout and still produce an accessible volume due to her inclusion of several helpful organizational resources that teachers may well take advantage of in undergraduate coursework. The *American Studies Now* signature overview of each chapter, complete with simple 1-2 sentence descriptions and a list of 8-10 keywords for the individual chapter, is invaluable, as is the clear glossary, chapter notes, and selected bibliography. The glossary is particularly useful in the undergraduate context; the entries ranging from "anti-capitalism" to "intersectionality" to "solidarity" offer an essential Raymond Williams-*Keywords* for where Sze maps overlapping areas of environmental justice and American studies scholarship. One organizational tool all of the *American Studies Now* series, including *Environmental Justice*, would benefit from is an index.

Jessica Hurley's *Infrastructures of Apocalypse* takes one inside the canon of post 1945 literature and retrains a reader's eyes from their skyward orientation,

expecting nuclear death from above, down towards the earth, the quotidian-yet-lethal mundane of the nuclear industrial complex's slow violence and the racialized apocalyptic chronopolitics of the Cold War. While literary and cultural critics have attended to the apocalyptic, universalized threat of nuclear Armageddon, and what Robert Lifton terms the "absurd double life" of living under the threat of nuclear death from above, Hurley's *Infrastructures of Apocalypse* reconsiders the archive of nuclear literature by focusing on the material consequences of the nuclear state's infrastructures for specific communities rendered "futureless" by the United States' investment in its nuclear complex—a complex economic and military industrial complex engaged in mining, refining, testing, planning and preparing the country for geopolitical influence through nuclear supremacy.

Each body chapter takes up narrative responses to the bureaucratic, infrastructural, and ecological imbrications inherent to the expanding nuclear complex in American life. These narrative responses come from what Hurley productively terms "hotspot" writers, those authors critiquing the nuclear state's everyday slow violence rather than the universalized Armageddon that never came. Roughly speaking, each chapter also covers approximately twenty years of the nuclear era, spanning the early 1950s to Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2015.

Categorically, the first body chapter, "White Sovereignty and the Nuclear State," stands apart from the rest of the book, serving as hinge point between hegemonic modes of white futurity inculcated by the nuclear state and the imposed futurelessness of Black, queer, and Indigenous communities. Contra the threat of ICBM-delivered Armageddon well-traced in literary studies of the post 1945 nuclear era, Hurley's first chapter explores "the fear of America transforming into its other under the internal pressures of the nuclear security" (42). In this first chapter Hurley traces the fear—even amongst otherwise conservative and hawkish white Americans—that the expansion of the nuclear state may transform America *from within* into something abhorrently *other*. America's proper, pre-nuclear self, Hurley argues, is commonly imaged as independent, democratic, and white, whereas America's potential post-nuclear other is always totalitarian, collectivist, and Oriental. Ayn Rand serves for Hurley as a paragon of this line of thinking and purveyor of its concretized anxieties in her novel *Atlas Shrugged*. Hurley looks to Rand's biography as both a Cold Warrior and nuclear skeptic who was, in her life and *Atlas Shrugged*, "deeply critical of the increasing bureaucracy, secrecy, and militarization of the American state" (68). In the novel, John Galt's supposedly self-made brilliance, independence, and indifference to the larger American population is coded as the white corrective to Project X, a "science fiction infrastructure of the nuclear state that... makes 'savages' of people" (53). The socialist savagery is undeniably enacted through anti-Asian tropes of "reflexive yellow-perilism." The nuclear state stands as a "apocalyptically radicalizing threat that must be resisted" by the impeccable rationality and heroically self-centered white Galt (73). It is only after the nuclear state's collapse into socialist anarchy and the loss of electricity that Galt and his compatriots are free to return to, and take their rightful place, within society. There is no need to salvage the savages;

they merely disappear.

Having established *Atlas Shrugged* as a paradigmatic white treatment of nuclear infrastructure Hurley turns in Chapters 2-4 to these alternative spaces of imposed futurelessness, explicating narratives which resist or radically inhabit futurelessness in opposition to the hegemonic futurity of whiteness and its nuclear ambitions. In Chapter 2: "Civil Defense and Black Apocalypse," Hurley juxtaposes the settler-colonial tropes of nonfictive Civil Defense Administrative with close readings of two Black, queer writers imagining post-apocalyptic American cities: James Baldwin and Samuel Delaney. Hurley notes that investitures in nuclear infrastructure in the 1960s came at the expense of civilian and urban infrastructure; white flight to the suburbs was pushed along not only by anti-Black sentiment but also by military projections that city centers would be Ground Zero for nuclear war. Thus, the growing sprawl of highways, byways, and commuter communities served a defense imperative. As inset maps of "Hypothetical Test Exercises" show, the defense community assumed the majority of African Americans would be wiped out within minutes of a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union, as cities such as Philadelphia, Detroit, and Memphis would be bombarded by missiles. It is against this nightmarish backdrop that Baldwin and Delaney interrogate the nuclear city as a historical iteration of how "race, environment, and time have been braided together in the Western world" and highlight the "instability" of the ideological systems that underpin this infrastructural constellation (122).

Chapter 3: "Star Wars, AIDS, and Queer Endings" takes a similar tact as Chapter 2 by first reading the non-fictional (yet fantastical) rhetoric surrounding Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (aka the Star Wars missile defense system) before attending to the chapter's central literary text, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. In this self-admittedly "wide ranging" chapter, Hurley takes up a "temporal regime" of "retrocontainment" that she argues is crucial to understanding the neoconservative movement of the 1980s and its present day, MAGA-flecked successors. Hurley argues the explosion of nostalgic 1950s iconography and popular culture in the 1980s tell us more about Regan era than about the actual state of the country in the mythologized 1950s. "It is impossible to imagine neo-conservatism without the 1950s," as the mythic 1950s of pop culturedom posits a time and place where the defensive posture of containment—towards communist ideological threats—actually worked. Instead of engaging with the challenges of an ecologically, culturally, and economically connected planet, the "metaphorized 1950s" stand as a conservative "gold standard" and "rededication" to valuing of the nuclear family and consumerist culture (126-127). Hurley links this ever-backward-looking fantasy embodied in 1980s fashion and pop culture to Reagan's fantasy of constructing a missile defense system that would re-place the U.S. as the only and undisputed (undisputable) nuclear hegemon, as it was in the early 1950s. Alongside this fantasy Hurley places her reading of the contrasting and contesting temporalities of Kushner's *Angels of America*. In the play, the return of 1950s figures such as Ethen Rosenberg and Roy Cohen exist with millennial and prophetic horizons of time. *Angels in America* offers up both retrocontainment

narratives within other narratives that threaten to “break open history.”

The final portion of *Infrastructures of Apocalypse* return to the material impact of radioactive isotopes and nuclear waste produced by two distinct kinds of events: the lingering impact of uranium mining and waste disposal which frame Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and the eruptive meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant discussed in the book’s Coda via Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*. By placing Silko and Wallace into conversation, Hurley is able to discuss ideas of nuclear colonization and decolonization within both novels. The CLEAN part of *Infinite Jest* promises a nation sustained through its own toxification, whereas the mysterious megalith of the nuclear snake in *Almanac* ultimately signifies disruption of the normative present in favor of an unknown and decolonial future.

Hurley’s attention to the long duree and material consequences of the nuclear state—it’s physical infrastructures, narrative structures, and chronopolitics—will no doubt pose useful lessons for scholars of post 1945 American literature, and in particular those tracing the many plateaus this literature offers on the study of race, environment, sexuality, and the relation of space/place to time. Hurley’s book should also prove useful to critics attempting to recognize and explore other archives of hotspot writers addressing anthropogenic climate change, the flagship issue defining 21st century environmental and social justice movements much as nuclear technology dominated the latter half of the 20th century. Like the nuclear state itself, climate change emerges at the concatenation of colonialism, racial capitalism, and militarism. And like the lines of argument Hurley draws in *Infrastructures of Apocalypse*, climate change engenders fierce scholarly, activist, and aesthetic debates around the temporality and scale of representation and political urgency.

Infrastructures of Apocalypse would have benefitted from some clearer glosses of the novels’ plot’s engagement with nuclear infrastructure in the body chapters. Hurley’s “hotspot” writers are largely canonical—including James Baldwin, Samuel Delaney, Ayn Rand, Leslie Marmon Silko, and David Foster Wallace—but nonetheless make for an eclectic collective. Some readers will appreciate this efficiency in Hurley’s writing, for others this lack of plot summary will create a higher barrier of entry and send readers back to the primary sources (or at least a Wikipedia page or two). Overall, however, this variety is no doubt a strength of the project, for it showcases both the breadth of literary engagement with the nuclear state as *infrastructure* and Hurley’s command of this rich and challenging archive.

Both Sze and Hurley clearly move from the assumption that narratives and culture matter to social movement struggles. The ideal and uncomfortable question(s) remain, however, of how to more productively read social movement work and explicit activism (Sze) together with the cultural work of novels and plays (Hurley). To be clear, Hurley’s notion of the “hotspot writer” is not synonymous with the intersectional “communities of solidarity” resisting environmental injustices that Sze describes within *Environmental Justice*. Hurley’s archive skews decidedly auteur over activist. Still, as Sze argues throughout *Environmental Justice*, it

is the frontline wisdom of the grassroots environmental justice movement that makes more readily apparent how "environmental violence is built into the history of the United States"—including its cultures and nuclear infrastructures. Hurley's productive reassessment of some of the most heavily read and critiqued authors within this fundamentally EJ framework attests to the productive interplay between activist traditions and diligently undisciplined American studies scholarship. Yet this is also the site of tension between these two books, and more broadly, American studies engagement with environmental justice. The struggles of environmental justice activism, artistic creation, and academic attempts to make meaning of all three seldom share common geographic and temporal horizons, something Bethany Wiggin noted in a recent forum on environmental justice at the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment Biennial Conference.

The chronopolitics of nuclear infrastructures, lead contamination, Indigenous sovereignty claims, and the slowly-yet-inexorably rising seas each pose the challenge of acute present social inequalities alongside long horizons of environmental risk and challenges for just governance. When such challenges exceed conventional spatial and temporal limits and boundaries, both Sze and Hurley look to the mushrooming "hotspots" that indicate much larger and complex webs of interlacing histories.

One potential site to continue interrogating these tensions within environmental justice is in Hurley's astute attention to chronopolitics of infrastructures. Hurley's reconsideration of the apocalyptic chronopolitics of the nuclear age parallel the ways that environmental justice movements has redirected environmentalist understandings of risk and temporality. It's not the environmental apocalypse of the future to mobilize against, both environmental and climate justice perspectives maintain, it's the last 500 years of oppression that continues to produce social and environmental catastrophe in the present. Hurley and Sze are interested in the ways in which cultural productions suture or disrupt taken-for-granted understandings of futurity, though the visions of new futures seem diffuse compared to both scholars' articulations of the past and present.

The environmental justice movement, as a "movement of movements," is shaking up established understandings of identity and labor, risk and precarity, and justice and solidarities. While both Sze's emphasis on activist "communities of solidarity" and Hurley's analyses of the U.S. nuclear state's physical and narrative infrastructures showcase the productive work of American studies scholars on issues of environmental justice, they also point to the ways in which environmental justice studies is maturing as an interdisciplinary field in its own right. This field rejects the separation of politics and poetics in understanding the environmental justice social movement, and uses the connections observed by EJ grassroots communities to guide readings of history and culture across social identities and conflicts. As the nuclear age continues to radiate its energies alongside the accelerating globalized challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, such scholarship is certain to evolve in tandem with the movements weathering the twenty-first century's storms to come.

