

Sylvia Hood Washington – Paul C. Rosier – Heather Goodall (eds.): *Echoes from the Poisoned Well: Global Memories of Environmental Injustice*.
Lanham, MD, 2006: Lexington Books, xxiii + 433 pp.

This book presents an impressive collection of case studies and 'memories' spanning several centuries and six continents and covering groups such as native Americans, African Americans, the Sami people of northern Finland, the Tarahumara Indians of central Mexico, Aborigines, the Maori community in New Zealand, the Isaan people of north-eastern Thailand, Zimbabwean peasants, and the Ogoni people of Nigeria. In little more than four hundred pages, authors from different academic and cultural background reflect on issues of environmental injustice and resulting conflicts. The concept of environmental (in)justice and the environmental justice movement, which originated in the United States just a few decades ago, is 'based on the principle that all people have a right to be protected from environmental pollution, and to live in and enjoy a clean and healthful environment' [EOEEA 2008]. Environmental justice means that 'no group of people, including a racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group, should bear more than its share of negative environmental impacts' [New York State Department of Health 2008]. Studies presented in *Echoes from the Poisoned Well* illustrate how the right to a clean environment and to protection from environmental pollution and negative environmental impacts is often violated. The possibility of social conflicts arising from these environmental issues is one reason why this book, and the study of environmental justice in general, may be of interest to sociologists and other social scientists. Also, as Steven Picou [2008] points out, newly emerging environmental hazards are likely to cause not only conflicts but also other 'social problems by disrupting communities, families, and in-

dividuals and exacerbating historical patterns of social inequality' (p. 520).

The editors of the volume sought to present what they call 'bottom up' environmental histories that represent the 'viewpoints of peoples and of indigenous communities which traditionally have been neglected' (p. xiv). Although individual chapters describe different stories of environmentally marginalised communities, they all explore 'the ways in which [such] injustices and the conflicts which arose from them can be understood, compared, and learned from across often quite different situations of colonialism and modernity' (p. xxi). In doing so, they also give a general idea of underlying principles of these conflicts. Part 1, Foundations and Origins of Environmental Injustice, provides the basic theoretical and conceptual framework for the case studies presented in Parts 2 and 3. The first chapter gives a general overview of the emergence of grassroots organisations and the environmental justice movement in the United States. The book then moves towards such issues as the role of women in environmental protection, African Americans' experience of environmental inequality, and the history of property and land use regulations and possible resentments and distrust between the races. In the fifth chapter, Heather Goodall describes the different ways in which colonialism has generated environmental injustice and suggests that 'colonialism offers a valuable lens for considering environmental injustice because it operates spatially' (p. 90). Goodall argues that 'power in colonies has been exercised through control over space and environment' (p. 74), which is particularly harmful to indigenous people whose culture, economy and social and political life is derived from their relations to the land. Similarly, Animashaun Ducre examines colonial practices in the use of space as a means of social control and introduces the concept of racialised spaces in an attempt to 'pro-

vide a new theoretical framework as an explanation for disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards on communities of color and the poor' (p. 121).

Part 2, *North American Memories of Environmental Injustice*, focuses on the history and experiences of environmental inequality in the United States. It addresses issues of housing and urban planning, homelessness, religion and the formation of national parks. However, Part 3, *Indigenous Memories of Environmental Injustice*, adopts a more global perspective, examining examples of environmental struggles from all continents presented by both academics and indigenous people themselves. To mention just a few examples, Rauna Kuokkanen and Marja K. Bulmer analyse how a municipality in northern Finland ignored the concerns of the local Sami people and their cultural rights. They describe a water-bottling project using water from a Sami sacred site, Suttésája, and uncover the hidden effects of colonial processes. The authors argue that colonialism has become so much more insidious that 'the Sami may become their own colonizers by inscribing colonial discourse upon themselves without necessarily being aware of it' (p. 219). This helps to explain why many Sami participate in the dominant discourse, ridicule their own culture, and despise Sami spirituality, including their sacred sites, such as Suttésája. Another example is Phia Steyn's description of oil-related environmental problems in the Niger Delta and particularly the ongoing struggle of the Ogoni people of Nigeria with Shell Nigeria and ultimately the Nigerian federal government. Other case studies include the problem of deforestation in central Mexico, depriving the Rarámuri people of their traditional land; the struggle against the Pak Moon dam on the Mekong River in northern Thailand; and Jacqui Katona's account of the aboriginal Mirrar people's protests against the Jabiluka uranium mine in Kakadu, northern Australia.

As the title suggests, one of the key themes of the book is water. This issue is addressed in Sylvia Hood Washington's chapter 'Wadin' in the Water', which reflects on the specific memories and meanings of water for African Americans in Cleveland, Ohio. Water-related problems and injustices are also dealt with in Goodall's 'Main Streets and Riverbanks', describing a battle over the Darling River in the Australian town of Brewarrina, and in Selby and Moore's account of the largely successful struggle of a Maori community in Aotearoa, New Zealand, to reclaim the Hokio Stream and make it clean once again. Similarly, Elis and Johann Tempelhoff describe a campaign and actions undertaken against the pollution of the Vaal River of South Africa caused by the South African steel corporation Iscor. And the list goes on. As Selby and Moore note in their chapter, 'for many indigenous communities, bodies of water invoke sadness at the loss of access to traditional fishing grounds and [...] have become sites of pollution and effluent disposal' (p. 299).

The fact that the authors of the chapters are not only researchers and academics, but also local activists, many of whom are members of indigenous communities, is undoubtedly one of the book's biggest strengths, because one of the book's most important goals was to present the voices of marginalised 'others' – of those 'most heavily burdened by environmental degradation' (p. xiv). However, this is also a weakness, since the chapters inevitably differ in quality, language and clarity. In spite of this at times distracting imbalance in quality and detail, it is the very diversity of the case studies, ranging from powerful narratives by indigenous authors to elaborate analyses, that makes *Echoes from the Poisoned Well* an interesting read. It is also not without interest that seventeen out of the twenty-seven writers who have contributed to the volume are women and/or refer to the role of women in the environ-

mental battles they describe. This adds to the relevance of the book for gender-oriented sociologists. The more than one hundred pages devoted to North American history and experience is likely to be less interesting for non-American readers, but given that the environmental justice movement originated in the United States it is perhaps not unreasonable.

To conclude, the book is a major contribution to the field of environmental justice and environmental history in particular. Along with academics and students it can also be recommended to environmental activists. Although the three parts of the book form a coherent whole, they can also be studied separately, depending on the reader's interest. The introduction claims that 'this collection contributes to the ongoing effort to create an alternative narrative that links the past to the present by demonstrating the continuing ways in which historically marginalized communities suffer the costs of environmental degradation and the consequences for a world that has shrunk in space and time' (p. xxii). I dare say this goal has been largely achieved.

Echoes from the Poisoned Well is valuable reading for anyone interested in environmental justice, environmental history or the struggles of indigenous people around the globe.

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