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Book Review: Sustainability: Approaches to Environmental Justice and Social Power

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BOOK REVIEW

Sustainability: Approaches to Environmental Justice and Social Power Edited by Julie Sze (NYU Press, 304 pages; 2018)

The U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development's 1987 "Brundtland Report" famously coined the phrase "sustainable development" to mean development which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹ Since then, sustainability has become an important buzzword in conversations surrounding environmental law, policy, and governance. But what does sustainability actually look like in practice? How do political landscapes shape and inform the meanings of sustainability?

In her book, *Sustainability: Approaches to Environmental Justice and Social Power*, editor and contributor Julie Sze deliberately pulls together scholarly pieces across various disciplines and positionalities to illustrate how sustainability must be "contextualized" and "situated" to avoid exacerbating social inequality. By asking what sustainability means, how it is conceptualized, and who its meaning benefits, this book emphasizes that sustainability is inherently varied and multifaceted. However, rather than shying away from this epistemological multiplicity, Sze and the other contributors explain that sustainability can take many forms, as long as interdisciplinarity and social justice remain central to the overall pursuit. The case studies in this book situate sustainability in both interdisciplinary and political terms in order to allow for hopeful visions of a more environmentally just and sustainable world.

Part I of the book explores how sustainability is engaged and measured across communities and fields of study. Using case studies from specific multidisciplinary collaborations, the first five chapters tease out some of the benefits and difficulties associated with working outside of one's specialty or intellectual community. For example, in chapter one, ecologists M.L. Cadenasso and S.T.A. Pickett tell the story of ninety-one-year-old Bernie Fowler, a former Maryland senator, who monitors the health of the Chesapeake Bay using a pair of white sneakers. Every year since 1988, Fowler has spent the second Sunday in June wading into the Patuxent River to index the height of the water on his overalls at the point when he can no longer see his white sneakers through the murky water. Motivated by his observation that the water quality in the Bay has deteriorated since his childhood, Fowler constructed a metaphor for understanding sustainability that is rooted in imagery, and accessible to individuals outside of the scientific community. Of course, the authors acknowledge that this sneaker test is highly informal and hardly scientific, but they suggest that in making visual sense of sustainability, Bernie Fowler found a way to "engage in the complexities" of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem with his own measurement for water quality.

1. U.N. Rep. of World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future: From One Earth to One World*, ¶ 27, U.N. Doc. A/42/427/24 (Aug. 4, 1987).

In addition to situating sustainability with regard to interdisciplinarity, this book also situates the concept within constructs of positionality and power. Part II considers how notions of sustainability are shaped by “temporal and spatial scales,” and emphasizes that social power dictates how environmental harms are distributed, thereby subjecting marginalized populations to the “slow violence” of environmental injustice. In reinforcing that “environmental crises and social inequality are in fact twins, born of coexisting, cultural, political, and economic processes,” this section asserts that true sustainability must begin with an anti-racist and decolonial foundation, rather than continuing “business as usual but with a green frame.” For example, Part II ends by connecting Eric Garner’s murder at the hand of a New York City police officer with larger environmental justice and public health issues through his final words, “I can’t breathe.” Though Garner’s death was ruled a homicide by the medical examiner, the police officer who was responsible for holding him in an illegal chokehold was able to evade prosecution, in part, on the basis of Garner’s asthma as a preexisting factor to his own death. The authors note that communities of color across the country face elevated exposure to air pollution, making asthma an environmental justice issue shaped by political, racial, and technological factors. By ignoring these societal complexities and framing Garner’s death as an individual problem, the NYPD was able to use the slow violence of environmental injustice to justify the direct and overt police violence responsible for Eric Garner’s murder. Rather than ending the book with a focus on Garner’s death, however, the authors conclude with Ross Gay’s poem “A Small Needful Fact,” which suggests that in his job at the Parks and Rec. Horticulture Department, Eric Garner likely cared for plants that continue to grow, making it easier to breathe.

Sze’s expertise in fostering “boundary crossings” between people and disciplines is evident, both through her own written contributions to the volume, as well as through the respect and enthusiasm of her contributing authors in the project. Reflecting the book’s message of multidisciplinary sustainability, Sze brings together ecologists, scientists, social scientists, scholars, and historians to bridge communication gaps among various disciplines and communities. This variety ensures that the book can be enjoyed by a variety of readers, regardless of discipline or expertise.

It likely goes without saying that this book is not simply a casual, “just for fun,” type of read. It is for filling with sticky-notes and annotations, for referencing later, and for completely reimagining flawed notions of one-size-fits-all sustainability. At times, the theme of intellectual accessibility is lost as some of the authors slip into academic jargon that is possibly unfamiliar to the average reader. However, unlike many other nonfiction, environmental justice books, Sze’s *Sustainability* will not leave the reader in worried contemplation of the planet’s imminent demise. Instead, it methodically addresses the flaws surrounding popularized notions of sustainability and leaves the reader room to imagine a future of socially just sustainability.

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