# Diagnosing an Ailing Earth

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# DIAGNOSING AN AILING EARTH

**Julie Sze**

**Jennifer Thomson,** *The Wild and the Toxic: American Environmentalism and the Politics of Health.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. xii + 202 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $29.95

What does a healthy planet look like? Scientific studies relentlessly document how ecosystems from the Amazon to the oceans are under stress. Journalists and the public translate these scientific findings through popular understandings of "sickness." A polluted planet is thus diseased and in need of a cure. Jennifer Thomson's *The Wild and the Toxic: American Environmentalism and the Politics of Health* meticulously traces the intellectual history of how "claims about health of ecosystems, the health of the planet, and the health of humans within the environment" (p. 1) came to be and, most significantly, the implications of these claims in U.S. political life.

Although discussions of the environment's relationship with health may now seem ubiquitous, Thomson argues that this relationship was born in a particular time (the 1970s and 1980s) and with politics that reflected the prevailing notions of their times and ideological contexts. Environmentalism and associated health claims and anxieties transformed from radical and collective visions to more individualistic versions in the 1990s under prevailing neoliberalism. Health and environment—and invocations to both—are inherently "political projects" (p. 1). *The Wild and the Toxic* is full of surprising details from stories that are well-known to environmental historians as well as those not as well-studied. Thomson's retelling of iconic battles situates their stakes intellectually and politically. She serves, in other words, as a guide through deeply contested ideological debates. Thomson's revealing histories that link health and the environment, especially in the Love Canal case, are illuminating and bracing. Her argument elucidates the broader significance of environmental history to American political culture, focusing on histories of medicine and health, and environmental justice, anti-toxics, and radical ecologies more broadly.

The book is centered on four case studies: Friends of the Earth, Love Canal, Biocentrism, and the Gaia hypothesis/climate change. Within each chapter lies a detailed account of the interrelationships between "ideas, tactics and activ-

ists" (p. 9). In tracing these links, Thomson disputes what has since become the standard account within environmental justice scholarship of environmental organizations in the US in the post-1960s era. These portray mainstream environmental organizations centered around Washington, D.C. focused on lobbying, in opposition to grassroots environmental justice groups with more diverse membership and a concentration on direct action. Thomson begins her introduction with social justice struggles connecting health and environmental conflicts in capacious ways, from the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike to United Farm Workers organizing in California to the free health clinics of the Black Panther Party. Although her introduction begins by arguing against the division between social justice and health/environment, Thomson moves rather quickly to get to her case studies. On the one hand, this choice reflects her engagement "with activists who constitute the mythology of Anglo-American middle-class environmentalism" in order to "clear space" for more integrative and critical cultural analyses (p. 13). Her recontextualization of lionized figures and movements parallels earlier research that environmental historians did in understanding John Muir in particular, and late-19th- and early-20th-century preservationists and conservationists in their historical and ideological contexts. However, given the richness of the existing scholarship on race and sanitation strikes, the UFW, and the Black Panther Party (Wanzer-Serrano's 2015 *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation;* the large body of work on the UFW such as Laura Pulido's classic 1996 *Environmentalism and Economic Justice*, Alondra Nelson's 2011 *Body and Soul*, to name just a few related to the cases she mentions), her contextualization of the lionized Anglo-American environmental leaders and actors would be strengthened by acknowledging this scholarship. Her category of "Anglo-American" is also puzzling. The stories she tells are U.S.-centered, whereas a truly Anglo-American environmental and intellectual history would have taken readers to Australia, the U.K., and Canada, for example. There is an Anglo-American story to be told about health and environment, but Thomson's is a story of U.S. white actors, most often (but not exclusively) elite.

That said, her individual chapters deliver on her bold premise. Thomson tells the stories of individuals, organizations, and ideas that have held and continue to hold heavy weight. Her chapter on Friends of the Earth (FOE) centers on David Brower, the former Sierra Club Executive Director. His environmental philosophy was a hybrid of "apocalypticism, neo-Malthusianism, …concerns for the intergenerational consequences of human action….an embrace of *Silent Spring* and the tendency to individualize responsibility" (p. 17). FOE conceptualized environmental health through political systems: from transparent, participatory democracy, to a hierarchically narrow vision of environmental health. In telling of this transformation, Thomson lives within the details of organizational culture, the issues that consumed members

and staff (specifically nuclear power), and the broader political climate (the Presidential election of Jimmy Carter). Multiple stories, from the leaders to the staff, contextualize decisions and conflicts within broad frames. One can imagine a similar, compact, and multi-layered history for many organizations and the debates and fractures that preoccupy them. In other words, the FOE chapter succeeds in highlighting the contingencies of the moment that each person and group lives within and sometimes struggles against.

An important element of the moment in which FOE emerged was the political hangover after the Vietnam War, which fostered a greater sense of interconnection across time, space, and pollution. One of the issues that FOE worked on was Agent Orange as part of the broader struggle against pesticides and herbicides. The U.S. Army's use of the defoliant was a "frame" for FOE and other environmental actors. Thomson chronicles how the environmental and health impacts of the Vietnam War bled through in the case of Love Canal and the contamination of the Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation. Although the history of Love Canal has been chronicled many times, Thomson's chapter "You're Murdering Us: Love Canal and Human Health" highlights how local residents "framed health as a right of citizenship as well as a marker of environmental interconnection" (p. 44) and how these rights were constructed and contested vis-à-vis risk assessment and health surveys. Love Canal residents invoked experiences of Southeast Asian and Cuban refugees (Mariel boatlift) to ground their political claims and rights of American citizenship. One activist declared: "We are American refugees, we're not boat refugees, but we're American refugees. We have no home. We've been pushed, frustrated, pulled, hauled" (p. 57). Love Canal, as previous historians have recounted, was a complicated movement, divided by racism, classism, renters versus homeowners, faith-based organizations, and between the local and national environmental organizations. One local group, PEOPLE for Permanent Relocation, sought asylum from a foreign country, in this case Canada. Whether local residents wanted government protection or political refugee status, their health as a right of citizenship was a key rhetorical device. How that health status was mobilized differed, at times bordering on nativist and racist (even by the standards of their own time). Her account of Love Canal prefigures later calls for relocation from industrial pollution (i.e. Norco's battle for relocation at the Shell refinery in Louisiana), to contemporary Arctic Native struggles calling for relocation from the impacts of climate change in places like Kivalina, Alaska. Thomson's history of relocation at Love Canal can inform and complicate these activist struggles on a wide array of issues, simultaneously reinforcing her claim that history matters in contemporary environmental and political struggles.

How that intellectual history matters is the focal point of Thomson's chapter on biocentrism. Here, Thomson hangs out with Beat poets, deep ecologists,

those dissatisfied with the professionalized environmental bureaucracy, and academic ecologists. This collection of the "counterculture, philosophers, disillusioned organizers, and academic scientists" (p. 73) worked together to "redefine health as metaphor" at United Nations gatherings, at Earth First! gatherings (such as Redwood Summer), and in the making of new academic fields such as conservation biology. Thomson pulls no punches in discussing the complicated dance between wilderness and biodiversity activism and their apocalyptic and antihumanist sentiments. The weaving together of these stories is particularly important now, when climate apocalypticism, xenophobia, and misogyny are coalescing through a resurgent ecofascism. Recent manifestos of mass killers in Christchurch (New Zealand) and El Paso (Texas, U.S.) explicitly invoke the environmental sins of immigrants and environmental disasters in linking political authoritarianism, white supremacy, blood-and-soil rhetoric, and environmentalism. In *Border Walls Gone Green* (2015), John Hultgren argues that contemporary invocations of "nature" grounded in place, tradition and simplicity, and against commodification stand as a response to neoliberalism. Since I came of age in the wake of Redwood Summer and the intense battle of ideas between variants of radical ecologies, I appreciated Thomson's historicization of these intellectual and activist fields. Although formal and organized xenophobia in mainstream environmental groups is no longer acceptable (i.e. Sierra Club's close flirtation with population control in the 1990s), these links remain deep and in some cases indelible. Thomson's account is a useful guide to the present, where circulating substrata of ideologies battle for dominance.

Finally, "Planetary Health in the Age of Climate change" explains how and why James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis became the "conceptual framework for climate change" (p. 99). Two revelations—that the earth is alive and the earth has limits—are the overarching frame for the hypothesis. What is less understood, is the broader cultural context of the Gaia hypothesis, and how oil corporations were invested in this articulation. Biographically, Lovelock was both a consultant for NASA and Shell. Intellectually, his Gaia hypothesis "brought homeostasis (constant control) and cybernetics together to frame the planet as a single feminized body of diverse internal organs" (p. 103). In other words, Gaia was both a sick patient and "a tough bitch." The doctor that would fix the problem was a "planetary environmental protection that synthesized bureaucracy with scientific and technological expertise" (p. 122). Put simply, radical roots of anti-consumerism, anti-capitalism, and other system-challenging approaches from earlier political movements were deferred in favor of technical fixes and what became the sustainability solutions approach (inadequate though they may be) of the last three decades. Thomson does not just reveal interesting factoids (although they are indeed fascinating, such as Lovelock's frequent opposition to environmentalism). While she is clear that the actors in her study are not the *cause* of environmental problems

(the U.S. and other developed nations, and multinational corporations under neoliberalism are), nonetheless, she argues that the subjects of her studies did important work. Some of that work was to "narrow" the horizons of activism away from collective thinking and action and towards neoliberal, individualistic, and reformist ends.

Ultimately, Thomson seeks to "mobilize historical analysis" in service of present-day liberation by "recuperating the fullness of meaning that health once had for environmentalism" (p. 130). She closes her book with several provocative reminders. First, that environmental history is part and parcel of the history of health and political culture. Second, history can (and should) work in collaboration with other fields, such as sociology. Although she is not a sociologist, I would have liked to learn how she chose her case studies (e.g., why FOE in particular, as opposed to the other large environmental groups), and where else she could imagine her methodologies instructive and her analysis holding. From interdisciplinary environmental studies, many of her findings are not surprising (e.g., Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara's edited *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities* from 2017 comes to mind). But Thomson's account potentially speaks to historians less invested in the claims from interdisciplinary fields. Lastly, she reminds us that how we think about and know environment and health, and how to fix both are ideological issues. Thomson's carefully researched book is thoroughly provocative and the implications are many in the politically contested moment we live in now.

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