



# Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice (Urban and Industrial Environments)

By Julie Sze

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**Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice (Urban and Industrial Environments)** By Julie Sze

Racial minority and low-income communities often suffer disproportionate effects of urban environmental problems. Environmental justice advocates argue that these communities are on the front lines of environmental and health risks. In *Noxious New York*, Julie Sze analyzes the culture, politics, and history of environmental justice activism in New York City within the larger context of privatization, deregulation, and globalization. She tracks urban planning and environmental health activism in four gritty New York neighborhoods: Brooklyn's Sunset Park and Williamsburg sections, West Harlem, and the South Bronx. In these communities, activism flourished in the 1980s and 1990s in response to economic decay and a concentration of noxious incinerators, solid waste transfer stations, and power plants. Sze describes the emergence of local campaigns organized around issues of asthma, garbage, and energy systems, and how, in each neighborhood, activists framed their arguments in the vocabulary of environmental justice. Sze shows that the linkage of planning and public health in New York City goes back to the nineteenth century's sanitation movement, and she looks at the city's history of garbage, sewage, and sludge management. She analyzes the influence of race, family, and gender politics on asthma activism and examines community activists' responses to garbage privatization and energy deregulation. Finally, she looks at how activist groups have begun to shift from fighting particular siting and land use decisions to engaging in a larger process of community planning and community-based research projects. Drawing extensively on fieldwork and interviews with community members and activists, Sze illuminates the complex mix of local and global issues that fuels environmental justice activism.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Drawing deftly on scholarship in urban sociology, geography, and American studies, Julie Sze presents an astute and generative analysis of recent struggles for environmental justice in New York. At a time when neoliberalism and privatization increasingly impose new hazards and injuries on communities of color, *Noxious New York* reveals how activist groups have been able to develop an entirely new calculus of environmental risk and reward through the creation of a 'street science' that blends the expert knowledge of researchers with the experiences of community residents. This is a book that makes major contributions to our understanding of urban inequality, the environment, and contemporary culture.

(George Lipsitz, Department of Black Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara; author of *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*)

" *Noxious New York* is a breath of fresh air in a world suffocating from pollution. Julie Sze has established herself as an authoritative voice on environmental justice movements. She uncovers two of the most ominous forces shaping all our lives today- and particularly the lives of the disenfranchised: the scourges of privatization and deregulation. Corporate power dominates our society from top to bottom, and the best hope for taking the planet back lies in the hands of activists like those featured in this outstanding book."

(David Naguib Pellow, Ethnic Studies Department, University of California, San Diego, author of *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago*)

"This is an excellent analysis of environmental justice in New York City, notable for its in-depth scholarship and faithfulness to environmental-justice principles. It will be of wide interest across social-science disciplines and within the professions of public health and planning."

(Tom Agnotti, Center for Community Planning & Development, Hunter College)

#### About the Author

Julie Sze is an Associate Professor of American Studies at University of California, Davis, and the director of the Environmental Justice Project for UC Davis's John Muir Institute for the Environment.

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