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The first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by several environmental disasters and debates about global climate change, which have compelled academics, policy makers, and grassroots organizations to reexamine the relationship between environment and development. But what exactly do these varied stakeholders mean when they use the term “environment”? For students and specialists alike, “environment” carries as much of a “complex and contradictory symbolic load” as “nature” (Soper 1995, 2). An overview of the etymology of “environment” brings some clarity and is a useful place to start if we are to understand the contrary ideologies and symbolic load the term carries.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) traces “environment” to the word “environs,” from Middle French. Ironically, in contrast to twentieth- and twenty-first-century perceptions of environment as wide open natural spaces, early moderns understood “environment” as a noun—“the state of being encompassed or surrounded”—or a verb—“the action of circumnavigating, encompassing, or surrounding something.” By the eighteenth century, “environment” designated “the area surrounding a place or thing.” Not until the twentieth century did the term “environment” come to represent the natural world, but even then “environment” also designated physical surroundings “as affected by human activity.” It is difficult to ignore the close proximity of the OED definitions of environment to the

etymology of the terms “colony” and “colonial”—or the Latin “*colōnia*”—a public settlement of a newly conquered country, “the planting of settlements.” Both “environment” and “colony” invoke a sense of enclosure, of space cordoned off by human activity. How might our understanding of “environment” and “the tragedy of the commons” be altered if we place the closing of the commons within the context of colonial settlement, as well as industrialization? Although the concept of common pasture lands and their enclosure dates to medieval land tenure systems, the term “the tragedy of the commons” is attributed to a 1968 *Science* article by Garrett Hardin, who argued that overgrazing will eventually deplete the commons unless its use is regulated by a private party or government. As a practical matter, the enclosure movement limiting open access to the commons resulted in the privatization of public space. What happens, for example, if we think of the tragedy of the commons in terms of Indian removal and the creation of the vast reservation system in the United States, reserves in Canada, or cotton plantations in the southern United States, sugar plantations in the Caribbean and Brazil, or tea plantations and poppy fields in India under the British raj? If we rethink environment as a history of enclosures, then we must also think about enclosures at the scale of the body.

In its broadest sense, the term “environment” connotes contested terrains located at the intersection of economic, political, social, cultural, and sexual ecologies. Scholars of postcolonial studies, indigenous studies, and globalism, as well as environmental activists from the Global South, point out that ideas about the relationship among culture, environment, and development are bound up with colonial ideologies of race, civilization, and progress. Until the last two decades of the twentieth century, the environmental perceptions of the poor, working-class, and marginalized minorities

were not the subject of sociological or anthropological studies in the Global North or the Global South. Although environmental justice activism and research in North America, Latin America, and South Africa, “environmentalism of the poor” in South Asia, green movements in Africa, and “landless peasant movements” in Latin America are receiving greater scholarly attention, to a large extent, perceptions of the environment in the Global North have been shaped by a small group of writers with access to publishers of works of literature. As a consequence, nature writing in North America and Europe, influenced by the Romantics, has been associated with leisure activities, escapes from the world of work and interactions with other human beings. Moreover, American and English poets and novelists, when gazing east, frequently exoticized the “Orient” as a “natural” reservoir for their spiritual longings. Although mountains, rivers, and other waterways may hold religious significance for indigenous peoples, conservation politics (embedded in colonial and imperial expansionist regimes) are often inspired by interpretations of particular places and peoples as virgin territory, untouched by human hands, urbanization, and technological revolution. This sentimentalization of nature perpetuates the nature-culture dualism inherited from European and North American Romanticism, a response to industrialization in the Global North. The challenge of modern environmentalists, or “contemporary new world pastoralists,” as Lawrence Buell puts it, is one of decolonization (1995, 55). How does one think through the “natural” environment without becoming entangled in the symbolic load of nature, or of nature-culture dualisms?

A focus on decolonization returns us to an understanding of “environment” as the enclosure of bodies of land, water, people, plants, and nonhuman animals in a colonial logic to exploit and appropriate biodiversity and indigenous knowledge. Vandana Shiva, physicist

and India’s foremost environmental writer and activist, identifies the privatization of water and the plunder of seeds and indigenous knowledge through the use of intellectual-property legal conventions as only the most recent form that enclosures have taken. “Patents on life,” Shiva argues, “enclose the creativity inherent in living systems that reproduce and multiply in self-organized freedom. They enclose the interior spaces of the bodies of human beings, plants, and nonhuman animals. They also enclose the free spaces of intellectual creativity by transforming publicly generated knowledge into private property” (1997, 7). In articulating a concept of “living systems that reproduce and multiply in self-organized freedom,” Shiva invokes an understanding of ecology that opposes itself to the imagined closed space of environment. “Biodiversity has been protected through the flourishing of cultural diversity,” Shiva insists, citing the example of neem, *Azadirachta indica*, a tree native to India and used for centuries as a biopesticide and a medicine, which has been patented by four companies owned by a U.S. multinational corporation (1997, 72, 69–71). This privatization (enclosure) is both a threat to biodiversity and an appropriation of indigenous environments and knowledge. Ecological economist Joan Martinez-Alier agrees, pointing out that chemical compounds, “such as morphine and quinine, [which] were originally discovered through their use by indigenous cultures,” are just a few examples of the debt the North owes to the South (2000, 62). Martinez-Alier argues that the “main enemy of environmental justice in South Africa remains the globalized economy plus a local ideology which still sees the environment in terms of wilderness more than human livelihood despite the competent efforts of a very large group of activists and intellectuals who show in practice that environmental justice may become one main force for sustainability” (2003, 59). In her articulation of ecology as living systems inclusive of human

knowledge, Shiva bridges the chasm between principles of deep ecology and environmental justice that have arisen in South Africa, which shares more ideologically with the settler colonies of North America than it does with India.

The *OED* offers a second definition of “environment,” dating to the mid-nineteenth century, which comes closer to late-twentieth-century understandings of ecology. In the English language, environment as “the physical surroundings or conditions in which a person or other organism lives, develops, etc., or in which a thing exists; the external conditions in general affecting the life, existence, or properties of an organism or object,” moves beyond anthropocentric or human-centered approaches; nevertheless, the retention of the term “surroundings” continues to connote enclosures or cordoned-off places rather than the more fluid concept of interdependent and interrelational ecological systems. Deep ecology or biocentric understandings of the environment arose out of a strand in the wilderness movement in American environmental thought and ecological movements in Norway. In the United States, deep ecology traces its roots to Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) and John Muir (1838–1914). If for Thoreau preservation of wild nature is important for the preservation of civilization, even though his idea of the wild is pastoral, a middle ground between the encroaching cities and the savagery of the “wilderness” (Buell 1995, 54), for nineteenth-century ecologist John Muir, “nature has an intrinsic value and consequently possesses at least the right to exist” independent of the needs of civilization (Payne 1996, 5). Although Muir is credited with developing the idea of the interconnection of ecosystems for American ecologists, his ecosystems are purified through the occlusion of human inhabitants. And while the Norwegian Arné Naess’s platform for deep ecology affirms that “the richness and diversity of

life forms on earth, including forms of human cultures, have intrinsic worth,” his support for “a substantially smaller human population” is controversial in marginalized communities, which have overall higher mortality rates and consume less of the world’s resources than affluent northern nations (Rothenberg 1993, 127–28). Critics of Naess’s biospheric egalitarianism, which seeks to place humans on an equal footing with other species, point out structural inequality and inequity within the greater human community. Environmental justice scholars and activists charge that deep ecologists—who reject anthropocentric or human-centered understandings of the environment—ignore social and economic inequality in both northern communities and the Global South (Guha 2000, 85).

Notwithstanding large and growing urban populations and the transformation of rural environments by agribusiness, mainstream environmentalism, by focusing exclusively on preserving “pristine wilderness” areas visited by those with leisure time and neglecting the environments and economic needs of workers, has long been vulnerable to charges of elitism. Although early-twentieth-century writers like Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945) chronicled the toxic environments faced by poor immigrant workers (Swedes, Poles, Hungarians, and Lithuanians) in an oil refinery in New Jersey, the urgency of industrial environmental problems did not transform environmental discourse in the United States. In short, green environments were subjects of environmental activism, while toxic brown environments became the purview of labor movements and occupational safety experts. It was not until the late twentieth century that the environmental justice movement linked issues of environmental equity with issues of social and racial justice. Environmental justice activists and scholars point out that the anti-urban bias of preservation politics has often resulted in the creation

of toxic ghettos in cities while scenic wonderlands have been cordoned off (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 2002). While the environmental justice movement has been influenced by Rachel Carson's (1907–1964) investigation of the relationship between the use of DDT and other pesticides and the health of human and bird populations in *Silent Spring*, few are aware of César Chávez's (1927–1993) struggles (as leader of the United Farm Workers) to end the spraying of banded pesticides over California fields where migrant farm workers toiled, grew sick, and died. The unequal enforcement of environmental laws and regulations, along with the creation of toxic wastelands in minority communities, raises issues of environmental equity. As sociologist Robert D. Bullard points out, "all communities are not created equal. Some are more equal than others" (2002, 90). "Environmental racism," Bullard argues, refers to "any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color" (2002, 90–91). In his research, Bullard investigates the ways in which seemingly innocuous municipal policy decisions such as where to locate municipal bus terminals have broad environmental justice implications for racialized communities often formed as a result of past restrictive housing and lending policies and practices. Environmental justice researchers and scholars point out that the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of people are inextricably linked. Finally, a consideration of social, cultural, and sexual ecologies encourages investigations of the differing ways in which "culture may be said to 'work' upon nature" (Soper 1995, 135). Bodies do not simply exist as finished products, but are complex ecologies continuously in the making. Their overdetermination as natural ignores the ideological naturalization of what is socially and culturally construed (136).

If, as Bill McKibben asserts in his introduction to the Library of America anthology *American Earth: Environmental Writing since Thoreau*, "environmentalism can no longer confine itself to the narrow sphere it has long inhabited" (2009, xxx), then environmental scholarship and movements must return to the broader meaning of the term "environment." "If it isn't as much about economics, sociology, and pop culture as it is about trees, mountains, and animals," McKibben continues, "it won't in the end matter" (2009, xxx). The future of the environment depends on the dissolution of the border zones between the environmental idealism of naturalism and the passion for environmental justice. At the grassroots level, community organizers in New Orleans have begun to engage with organizers in the Maldives, and Canadian university students participate in exchanges and dialogues with their counterparts in South Asia. But they are not encouraged by decisions made by those at the highest echelon of power in both the North and the South, where governments continue to treat environments as if they are enclosed "surroundings" rather than complex interlinked ecological systems.