

Preface

On October 9, 2004, I scanned the front page of the *New York Times* and discovered with pride that Wangari Maathai had won the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her pioneering work in launching Kenya's Green Belt Movement, in promoting sustainable development, and in seeding ecodevelopment projects for women in rural Kenya. Six months earlier, Margie Eugene Richard of Norco, Louisiana, had won the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for her victorious campaign to protect her community from toxic emissions from the Shell Oil Company's plant near her home. And four months before that, I had won the tenth annual Heinz Award for the Environment as a, according to the award's wording, "passionate crusader for protecting the environmental health of urban inner cities."

Yet not long ago I was amazed, but not surprised, to find that a magazine article titled "The Best of 2004," which featured a section on environmentalists, included no people of color. In the span of eleven months, three of the world's largest individual achievement prizes for 2003–2004 went to black women working for environmental justice, who had acted as agents for change in their rural, urban, and global communities. This oversight testifies to the continued invisibility of people of color. It also

underscores the fact that work remains to be done in order to overcome classism, racism, sexism, and paternalism.

The Quest for Environmental Justice pays a long overdue tribute to the women of color who are the grassroots warriors fueling our movement, who bring to it their vision, love, and intensity yet get little recognition. Though many of them have passed from this earthly struggle, their legacy is uplifting, endearing, and ultimately, strengthening. Those of us working within the movement have the privilege of building on their accomplishments. They form a solid foundation that we can step up on in order to move forward.

This book recalls to mind the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which transformed the dominant paradigm of environmentalism and defined the environment holistically as being where we live, work, play, pray, and learn. Those of us in the movement see our concerns as interrelated: disinvestment, transportation, poverty, racism, pollution, deteriorating housing, land use and zoning, health disparities, environmental health, and sustainable development.

Environmental justice has broadened its focus beyond pollution and environmental hazards to focus on benefits and amenities. For example, the themes of open space and waterfront access, environmental benefits that historically have been withheld from communities of color, have emerged as major issues in grassroots communities around the country through proactive community planning. West Harlem will see the construction of its first waterfront park, on the Hudson River, which has been designated an American Heritage River and yet is, ironically, the largest Superfund site in the nation.

The politics of pollution that govern the siting of industrial facilities pose a special threat to our parks and open space, as well as to the neighborhoods in which we live. My eyes smart at the notion of a “neighborhood zoned for garbage,” because I can still taste the moment in 1986 when I realized that this label characterized the neighborhood in which I lived. But I smile when I remember the phone call in 2004 telling me that the mayor had heard the message of our Northern Manhattan Environmental Justice Coalition’s eighteen-month campaign, Fair Share, Not Lion’s Share. The campaign had persuaded the mayor not to reopen and expand a marine transfer station (a facility where household garbage is offloaded from trucks to river barges) in a community disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards.

Our local struggles over waste and toxic chemicals are linked to global environmental struggles. *The Quest for Environmental Justice* connects

the struggles of people of color in the United States with the emerging international environmental justice movement that seeks to address threats resulting from globalization, corporate greed, poverty, the waste trade, military toxics, and human rights violations. The environmental and economic conditions in Louisiana's petrochemical corridor and in the Southwest, for example, are linked to some of the same transnational corporations that have waged resource wars against native and indigenous peoples around the world, exploited the people and spoiled the land in the oil-rich Niger Delta, and created environmental wastelands in South Africa.

This type of environmental devastation is not limited to the Third World. Rolling along Louisiana's Plantation Road in 1998, I saw for the first time the Mississippi River, a plantation, and a levee—things previously known to me only through literature, songs, and film. Seeing tiny communities there, and meeting residents living sandwiched between industrial monoliths, while I was on the "toxic tour" of Louisiana's petrochemicals corridor reminded me of the warm, stoic, and pragmatic seniors I had worked with in Harlem, like Genevieve Eason and Edythe Beltz. They had been catalysts for my getting involved in the fight against environmental racism. They did not know this phrase in 1985, but a fight was something they recognized all too well. Getting to know the dynamic residents of Convent and Norco, and learning how they've struggled over the years, has been as transformative for me as my experiences in Harlem.

The "toxic tours" that I went on in Durban and Johannesburg showed me that the communities in which residents must share a fence line with toxic facilities look much like the ones here at home. However, life there is made even worse by the harsher circumstances of human rights abuses, as well as by poor sanitation infrastructure, the lack of solid waste disposal, the lack of electricity, and the lack of other basic services usually provided by government. I remember the anticipation I felt on my first trip to Africa—to Nigeria, where I traveled with Connie Tucker of the Southern Organizing Committee to Abuja, Lagos, Kaduna, Owerri. I was paired with consultants from a Nigerian nongovernmental organization, helping to deliver organizational-development workshops to Nigerians involved in leading or starting nongovernmental organizations and community-based organizations. Though we were not permitted to enter the controversial Niger Delta area, we were allowed to travel as close by as Owerri, where, on the second day of the environmental law workshop that we presented, Nigerian military police entered the complex with

drawn guns to disrupt the workshop and disperse its participants. This last point shows the connection between environmental degradation and the military dictatorship, a point discussed in depth in chapter 12 of this volume.

With the reelection of President George W. Bush in 2004, there have been calls for reassessing mainstream environmentalism, a movement that pioneered environmental regulation in the 1970s, but that finds itself sorely challenged to provide transformational leadership in the twenty-first century. The effectiveness and moral authority of the environmental justice movement have infused a gritty new spirit into a new model of environmentalism. This model redefines the environmental protection and conservation paradigm, transforming it into one that is accountable to its grassroots base, replicable, multiethnic, multiracial, and multidisciplinary. The activist-scholars of this movement lift up the voices and show the perspectives of the grassroots, who rarely have the time or resources to document their own work.

To build robust communities that speak for themselves, we must first teach people to exercise their power and make use of democracy. Building democratic institutions that have power will aid the struggle for peace development and environmental justice. Dr. Maathai said in the lecture she delivered at the Oslo City Hall in December 2004, when she accepted her Nobel Prize, "The Norwegian Nobel Committee has challenged the world to broaden the understanding of peace: there can be no peace without equitable development; and there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space. This shift is an idea whose time has come."