
Sarah Marie Wiebe. *Everyday Exposure: Indigenous Mobilization and Environmental Justice in Canada's Chemical Valley*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017. 280pp. ISBN 9780774832649.

<https://www.ubcpress.ca/everyday-exposure>

Aamjiwnaang First Nation, home to 850 Anishinaabek people, is in a perpetual state of alert. For the Native people on this reserve, leaks, spills, and evacuation are normal, every-day events. Wiebe grounds her review of the contemporary issues on Aamjiwnaang Reserve within the context of First Nations-settler relations. She makes clear connections between historical events and current circumstances. The principle of *Terre nullius* that justified the original colonial displacement of Indigenous Peoples now justifies the placement of toxic waste in the “empty spaces” that are home to contemporary Native Peoples. Aamjiwnaang First Nation is surrounded by Chemical Valley, Canada’s densest concentration of petrochemical plants.

Land is intertwined with culture and identity for Native people. By definition, being Indigenous means being connected to and defined by a particular place. For the Anishinaabek and other First Nations Peoples land is an animate being; a relative to be cared for. Conversely, many members of settler societies think of land as a resource or commodity to be exploited. Defining land as a resource rather than a relative makes the toxic environment of Chemical Valley possible. Wiebe describes how Aamjiwnaang First Nation and surrounding territories have become a sacrifice zone; a place where noise pollution and test sirens compound toxic emissions. As Wiebe notes, “sounds mask the silence with which chemicals penetrate bodies” (11).

Wiebe describes the state-sanctioned slow violence perpetrated on the health of humans and the environment. She provides numerous examples that document the expendability of this area and population such as a time when the warning siren system failed due to a dead battery and a communication breakdown where evacuated residents were sent home prematurely before the “all clear.” Such scenarios depicting indifference to public safety are normal around Aamjiwnaang. This is a place where children play a game where they scoop up mercury. In a particularly haunting example, Wiebe describes how black soot covered children’s clothes at the tribal daycare center as well as other areas of the community.

In 2011, the World Health Organization documented that, Sarnia, the town that surrounds the reserve, has the worst air quality in Canada. Native people in Aamjiwnaang First Nation must monitor their own wellbeing in a climate of state withdrawal of responsibility. They become first responders to spills, accidents, and releases as responsible environmental citizens and stewards to the polluted landscape. A maze of jurisdictional ambiguity has led to shifting the weight of responsibility for environmental issues onto individuals, in spite of the fact that environmental risks are generated elsewhere. The story she tells of barrels of waste that fell off a truck almost sounds comical if it wasn’t so tragic. She describes various entities trying to justify shirking responsibility for clean-up based on precisely where the truck was, which way the barrels rolled, where the waste came from, and where it was going. Meanwhile, as this dance to avoid responsibility played out, the wellbeing of the Anishinaabek people and territory was virtually ignored. This has led Native people to become activists with a “heightened sense of commitment,

mobilization, and engagement in order to hold their industrial and government neighbors to account” (81).

As might be expected, living in Chemical Valley has significant health consequences. Cancer, respiratory maladies, and premature death rates are high. Among many challenges for the people living within this toxic area, Wiebe has identified the importance of environmental reproductive justice. Notably, the Anishinaabek people of Aamjiwnaang First Nation have experienced a sharp decline in male births. This book details the experiences of the community in trying to hold someone accountable for the environmental risks associated with living within this territory.

The preface describes the book as “a collection of stories that travel through time, this book aims to engage diverse knowledges, insight critical thought, inspire reflection.” The author contrasts Indigenous understandings of land, culture, and environment with non-relational forms of being and knowing that characterize dominant society understandings. This book is based on doctoral research and provides a detailed description of how the author/researcher approached the project. This includes theoretical and research underpinnings as well as how the author approached and engaged the Indigenous community.

At times the book is heavily immersed in the author’s theoretical analysis. For example, she highlights and dissects the meaning of terms such as citizen and citizenship. She identifies her work as being grounded within a *reproductive justice framework of inquiry*. This in-depth discussion of her theoretical positioning lends transparency to her approach but may feel tedious to some readers. Likewise, some points are made multiple times and may feel redundant. On the other hand, storytellers often repeat their points with slight variations, both for emphasis and to get the attention of different listeners.

Wiebe tells this important story well. Her words are powerful and her analysis insightful. She also uses black and white photographs that juxtapose reserve residents and chemical plants. In this instance, a picture is indeed worth a thousand words. She includes a map of the reserve surrounded by industry. Poetry of band members is included so readers hear their perspectives in their own words.

Documenting this community’s struggle is crucial. People around the world need to be informed about the situation of Aamjiwnaang First Nation and similar challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples in other areas. Wiebe tells the story of a community fighting for justice. She describes their situation and advocacy efforts in detail as well as the many barriers that they face in seeking accountability and justice. She reminds us, however, that the story isn’t over yet. Community members and allies continue to fight for environmental justice and human dignity. In this sense, she leave us with a glimmer of hope and the possibility for justice, albeit within an overwhelmingly indifferent and often hostile context.

Readers interested in Indigenous issues and environmental justice will find this a worthwhile read. It is a poignant case example that illustrates power relations, colonialism, and environmental degradation, as well as hope, resilience, and the importance of place for Native people.

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