



Carl Anthony: Earth Day and EJ

Interview by B. Jesse Clarke

Carl Anthony co-founded *Race, Poverty & the Environment* in 1990. In this interview with *RP&E* editor B. Jesse Clarke, Anthony shares his reflections on some of the key milestones that led to the creation of the journal and its role in the ever-evolving environmental justice movement. Recorded at the studios of the National Radio Project, this interview introduces *Radio RP&E*—podcasts and broadcasts from the national journal of social and environmental justice. Read an edited excerpt below or listen to the full interview at www.urbanhabitat.org/20years.

Jesse Clarke: Can you talk a little bit about where the environmental movement was on Earth Day 1970?

Carl Anthony: Earth Day 1970 was started, in part, as a result of the work of Rachel Carson who wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962. That book and similar research on the effects of DDT sparked a growing interest in the environment that went beyond protecting wildlife and open spaces. In some ways, it was paradoxical, because it became a powerful protest movement that was also distancing itself from issues of race and social justice.

Some proponents of environmentalism sought to use it to put a closure on the struggles of the 1960s and launch a new kind of consciousness about the earth and the environment, without really addressing issues of social and racial justice. But in fact, all these movements were interrelated. Many people, for innumerable reasons, were really upset with the dominant society and the way in which it was destroying both culture and places. Indeed, the new environmental movement owed something to the civil rights movement.

Earth Day was organized as a “teach in” about the earth as proposed by then Senator Gaylord Nelson. The teach-in can be traced back to the anti-war movement and before that, to the freedom schools of the civil rights movement. And so, the first Earth Day actually came out of that tradition.

The anti-war movement gathered steam just as the civil rights movement was winding down, and the

environmental movement came in and got a lot of energy from the anti-war movement. The environmentalists learned from the civil rights movement how to mobilize a large number of people. But it was mostly a white movement... European Americans.

Clarke: Jumping ahead two decades, in 1990 environmentalism was still basically a white, middle class movement.

Anthony: Yes, it was. So much so that 150 civil rights groups wrote a letter to the “Big Ten” mainstream environmental groups in January 1990, complaining that the memberships, the staffs, and the boards of directors of these organizations were almost all white. But most devastating of all, their priorities really reflected the issues of concern to predominantly suburban constituencies, and not those of people of color. Many actually went against the interests of the communities of color.

Then in 1987, the United Church of Christ put out a report entitled *Toxic Wastes and Race*, which touched off a shift. That report revealed that the most reliable predictor of where toxic waste dumps are located was “among communities of color.” Three out of five communities of color were at risk from these toxic waste dumps.¹

Clarke: How did the launch of *RP&E* come about?

Anthony: At about this time, Luke Cole and I went to a public interest legal conference in Oregon. A thou-



sand lawyers were there, all of whom were white. In reaction to this experience, when we got home we had a little caucus with a few people to talk about issues that concern people of color and the environment. We wanted to reach out to others who had similar concerns and to publish them. We were hit by a barrage of stories from all over the country. Apparently, people all over were becoming aware that the time had come for this movement. We published their work in a journal that became the forerunner of *RP&E*.

Then in October 1991, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice convened a conference in Washington to which about 600 people came from across the United States. About 400 of these people were actually from communities of color grassroots organizations. The conference managed to synthesize all the different issues and concerns into 17 principles of environmental justice, which were then published in many journals and books.

Clarke: How did you begin to develop this concept of moving environmentalism into an urban context?

Anthony: Because of the white bias of the environmental movement, there was almost no talk about cities, even though 85 percent of the population of the United States lived in cities and metropolitan areas. The white environmental movement was focused mostly on wilderness protection... on protecting the water, the land, the air; and also increasingly on looking at biological resources. But the fact

of the matter is that all this pollution actually comes from the cities.

Even though there was a lot of focus on the issue of toxic pollution, which was becoming a huge problem for everybody in the country in 1990, there was a full range of issues that was not being discussed. Many of the problems in our communities came from the fact that there had been this rapid expansion of the suburbs, which was contributing to sprawl and to the abandonment of the inner city.

I had the honor and the privilege of introducing the issue of transportation justice at the first people-of-color environmental leadership summit along with Eric Mann, who started the Bus Riders' Union in Los Angeles, and Barry Commoner, who had run for President of the United States under the Peace and Justice Party.

Although we introduced this idea of transportation justice at that summit, the issues go back a long way. It was really a new framing of an old issue. People who know about civil rights realize that transportation justice is deeply embedded in the civil rights movement.

Clarke: All the way back to Plessy...

Anthony: Yes, to *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) and more recently to *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), which came to the fore because of the inequitable investment in school buses. And of

Photo:

The United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice briefing to release its *Toxic Wastes and Race* report at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., 1987.

© 1987
United Church of Christ



course, we have Rosa Parks. So, in many ways, it was just us putting a new label on something that people already understood deeply.

One of the really remarkable things that we have grown used to, yet have a very shallow historical perception of, is our over-reliance on automobiles. In 1900 there were, practically speaking, no automobiles, no paved roads. In an incredibly short period of time—just over 100 years—the automobile has changed all the countries and all the people in the world. Freeways have literally paved the way for the abandonment of our cities.

In terms of transportation policy in this country, the government has been underwriting people running from each other. Not just from the black people—they're running from each other.

And this is simply not sustainable because of the direct relationship between this pattern of over-reliance on automobiles as an escape and the CO₂ emissions that come from the automobiles. This has to come to an end.

Clarke: As you look at the trajectory of the environmental justice movement, what do you consider some of its key victories over the course of this time?

Anthony: It's now a worldwide movement. Putting the concept of environmental justice on the global radar screen is one big accomplishment. Also, the whole issue of the intersection of public health and the

environment and the growing awareness of the public health challenges of the way we build our cities.

Clarke: In what respect has the movement fallen short? What remains basically unchanged?

Anthony: Well, I'm actually a bit of an optimist about all this. I remember seeing a television program with [former Secretary of State Henry] Kissinger about two weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall where he said: "This is absolutely stable. This will never fall." Within two years we saw the demise of the Soviet Union.

I believe that there are changes that take a long time to come to fruition but when they happen, they are big. Right now, the biggest challenge that we're facing is global warming and climate change. And although the climate issue is unique, in some ways, it is still the same old thing. It's about who's in power, who makes the decisions, who reaps the benefits, and who bears the burden.

Clarke: What are some of the intellectual issues you'd like to see *RP&E* bring to the fore? And what kinds of discussions do you believe should be engendered amongst the current generation that's talking about these issues but has not framed them in these terms?

Anthony: I have a funny story about the San Francisco school district. They came out with a report about 15 years ago that said: "Eighty-six percent of

Photo:

Carl Anthony, interviewed in the studios of the National Radio Project.

© 2010 Khanh Pham

the population in the school district of San Francisco are minorities, and sixteen percent are the majority.”

Clarke: New math.

Anthony: Yes, but seriously, this big demographic shift is going to cause us to rethink a lot of things. In California now, the majority population is people of color.² By 2023, the children of the people of color will be the majority of children in the United States and by 2043, people of color will be the majority population in the United States of America. This is a radical transformation that we have not quite caught up with. It’s going to make everybody redefine who we are as a people and as a country.

Clarke: In fact, the people who have been running the country have been the minority all along. It’s about three or four percent of the population controlling the key levers of power.

Anthony: Exactly.

Clarke: So, back to the question of what coalition of people could really gain political power to change the direction of this country and the world?

Anthony: All of the social movements that we have thought about over the last couple of decades—the women’s movement, the environmental movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the labor movement, the indigenous people’s movement—have evolved in the last couple of hundred years and have a common root. This is a global movement. We’re a little behind. The transnational corporations have been two or three steps ahead of us. But we have the numbers—if only we can really begin to understand our relationship to each other. And I feel pretty optimistic about that.

Clarke: But if you look at the fundamental power relationships and the methodologies available to movements to challenge power—the legal track, the legislative track, the popular movement track, the direct action track—which tracks can lead us to that critical moment of the sudden dissolution of the empire?

Anthony: One of the things that came out of my own journey in the environmental movement is that my own sense of time has really expanded. This sense of deep time is something that I really didn’t have before. As an African American, my sense was that everything terrible began in 1619 when the black people were brought over here, enslaved, and forced to work in the plantations.

In order for us to make sense of this, we have to have a story that goes back to the beginning of creation. The crisis that we’re facing globally is actually disturbing the basic patterns of life on the planet and is the worst period of extinction for creatures on this planet in 65 million years.

This is bigger than capitalism. It’s bigger than imperialism. It’s bigger than all the isms, all the movements, and all the struggles we’ve had. And there’s gonna be hell to pay!

As a result, we have a global consciousness that’s beginning to emerge at the grassroots level. People all over the world are engaged in a collaboration even if they don’t know who the other people are. And even though corporate interests—and the one percent of the population that controls over half of the global wealth—are making all the decisions that are putting us at huge risk, there is something much bigger going on.

You know that poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, about the British soldiers who were charging into this battle unaware that there were thousands and thousands of people on the other side of the mountain? They were up against something much bigger than they expected. The British thought the sun would never set on their empire, but it did.

So, you know, as bad as the corporations are at a transnational level, there’s something bigger happening here. And being a part of that is really inspiring for me. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, United Church of Christ, 1987. <http://urbanhabitat.org/node/5346>.
- ² According to the U.S. Census Bureau, white persons of non-hispanic origin are 42.3 percent. However, as a racial category, most Latinos are counted as white, in which case the white population including Hispanics is counted at 76.6%. California QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau. <http://quickfacts.census.gov>.

Carl Anthony is a co-founder of Urban Habitat and Race Poverty & the Environment Journal and with Dr. Paloma Pavel, also a co-founder of Breakthrough Communities. B. Jesse Clarke has been the editor of RP&E since 2005.

Special thanks to the National Radio Project for helping with this recording.

& the **Race, Poverty Environment** the national journal for social and environmental justice

Editor Emeritus
Carl Anthony

Publisher
Juliet Ellis

Editor
B. Jesse Clarke

Design and Layout
B. Jesse Clarke

Copyediting and Proofreading
Merula Furtado

Publishing and Layout Assistant
Christine Joy Ferrer

Urban Habitat Board of Directors
Joe Brooks (Chair)
PolicyLink

Romel Pascual (Vice-Chair)
Mayor's Office, City of Los Angeles

Tamar Dorfman (Treasurer)
Policy Link

Carl Anthony
Cofounder, Urban Habitat

Malo Andre Hutson
*Department of City and Regional Planning
University of California, Berkeley*

Felicia Marcus
Natural Resources Defense Council

Arnold Perkins
Alameda Public Health Department (retired)

Deborah Johnson
San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency

Wade Crowfoot
Environmental Defense Fund

Organizations are listed for identification purposes only.

Subscribe to RP&E

Annual subscriptions are \$20 for groups and individuals; \$40 for institutions. (Free for grassroots groups upon request.)
Subscribe online at www.urbanhabitat.org or Send subscription checks to: *RP&E*, 436 14th Street, #1205, Oakland, CA 94612.

© 2010 by the individual creators and Urban Habitat. For specific reprint information, queries or submissions, please email editor@urbanhabitat.org.

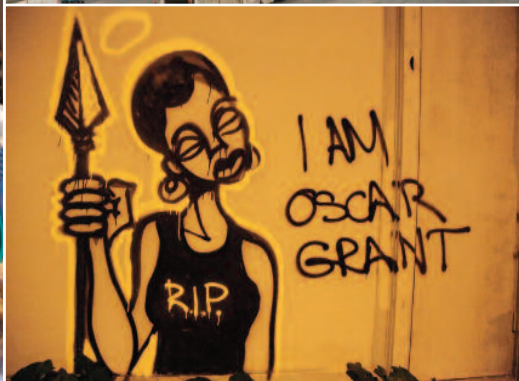
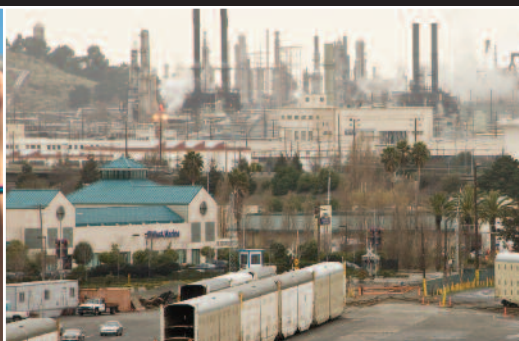
ISSN# 1532-2874

Race, Poverty & the Environment was first published in 1990 by Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation's Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment. In the interest of dialogue, *RP&E* publishes diverse views. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors, Urban Habitat, or its funders.

Economic Justice

Environmental Justice

Transportation Justice



Photos: (Left) Green for all Rally. © 2010 Green for All
(Upper center) Chevron refinery in Richmond. © 2008 Scott Braley
(Lower center) Oscar Grant memorial graffiti. © 2009 Elliott Johnson
(Upper right) Bus Riders Union organizes in Los Angeles. © 2009 BRU
(Lower right) Foreclosed home in Richmond, CA. © 2009 Urban Habitat

Racial Justice

Spaces, Places, and Regionalism

the Race, Poverty & the Environment



the national journal for social and environmental justice

20th anniversary CD now available!



- Spring 1990 ♦ Earth Day
- Summer 1990 ♦ Cultural Diversity
- Winter 1991 ♦ Women of Color
- Spring 1991 ♦ Pesticides
- Summer 1991 ♦ Energy
- Winter 1992 ♦ The Summit
- Spring 1992 ♦ Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Summer 1992 ♦ Water
 - Fall 1992 ♦ Native Nations in 1992
- Spring 1993 ♦ Urban Problems
- Summer 1993 ♦ Population and Immigration
 - Fall 1993 ♦ Latinos and the Environment
- Spring 1994 ♦ Military Base Conversion
- Winter 1995 ♦ Environmental Justice and the Law
- Summer 1995 ♦ Nuclear Technology & Communities of Color
 - Fall 1995 ♦ Social Justice and Transportation
- Spring 1996 ♦ Multicultural Environmental Education
- Fall 1996 ♦ The Border
- Winter 2000 ♦ A Place at the Table:
 - Food & Environmental Justice
- Winter 2001 ♦ Reclaiming Land and Community:
 - Brownfields & Environmental Justice
- Summer 2002 ♦ Fixin' to Stay: Anti-Displacement Policy
 - Options & Community Response
- Summer 2003 ♦ Where Do We Go from Here? A Look at
 - the Long Road to Environmental Justice
- Fall 2003 ♦ Governing from the Grassroots:
 - EJ and Electoral Activism
- Summer 2004 ♦ Reclaiming our Resources: Imperialism and EJ
- Winter 2005 ♦ Burden of Proof: Using Research for EJ
- Winter 2006 ♦ Moving the Movement:
 - Transportation Justice
- Summer 2006 ♦ Getting Ready for Change:
 - Green Economics and Climate Justice
- Spring 2007 ♦ Just Jobs: Organizing for Economic Justice
- Fall 2007 ♦ Educating for Equity
- Spring 2008 ♦ Who Owns Our Cities?
- Fall 2008 ♦ Race and Regionalism
- Spring 2009 ♦ Everyone Has the Right to...
- Fall 2009 ♦ Climate Change: Catalyst or Catastrophe?
- Spring 2010 ♦ 20th Anniversary Edition

There are over 600 articles in the RP&E archives. Together they provide a compelling view of the environmental justice movement from its roots. Visit www.urbanhabitat.org/rpe where you can order back issues of *RP&E*, read from our archives, catch up on Environmental Justice news, research environmental justice, climate justice, transportation justice and much more. Our latest addition is *RP&E Radio*: audio recordings of in-depth interviews and speeches from the movements' for racial, economic and gender justice. Our 20th anniversary collection includes all the back issues in PDF format, an Excel or CSV index of issues, authors and articles and our first four podcasts. Order today!

Use the form below or order online:
www.urbanhabitat.org/subscribe

88

Yes! I want an annual subscription to *Race, Poverty & the Environment*.
 Sent free of charge to grassroots groups upon request.
 \$20 (Individuals) \$40 (Institutions)

Yes! I want to support *RP&E Radio*—send me the CD collection
 \$125 Other Donation \$ _____

Name: _____
 Organization: _____
 Address: _____
 State: _____ Zip: _____ Email: _____

A check is enclosed Please charge my Visa/MasterCard
 Visa/MC Number: _____ Exp. Date: _____
 (Please include the 3-4 digit card verification number found on the back of most credit cards.)

Signature: _____