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Poetry is an expressive form of literature that allows for powerful analyses of injustices in a relatable, human text. In her poem “Dirty River Girl,” Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha does just that with a reflection on the inequitable impacts of environmental harms in and around Worcester, Massachusetts. The basis for Piepzna-Samarasinha’s analysis in the poem begins with a critique of the way environmental injustices have created unequal distributions of environmental harms and protection from these risks. It then moves to authority’s failure of protecting people, especially the most vulnerable, from environmental risks, which is subsequently followed by a questioning of authority and its credibility. Beyond just wilderness, the human side of the environment is one of the keystones of environmental justice. “Dirty River Girl” draws important connections between the human aspect of the environment and disability studies writings on acceptance of variance from a norm. Piepzna-Samarasinha’s poem reflects the environmental justice focuses of unequal distribution of environmental risks and a system not prepared to address these inequalities as well as an analysis from disability thinkers as to how this system can lose the humanity of vulnerable groups.

Piepzna-Samarasinha’s poem centers on the narrator’s personal experiences with the impacts of environmental harms in her community. Her work echoes many environmental justice thinkers and includes an emphasis on the inequitable distribution of these environmental risks in society. To begin with, in the poem the river is referred to as she/her and is personified as a woman’s body: “put to work like our working-class women’s bodies, worked and worked to make someone else money” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, line 9). Like the working-class women, the river itself bears an unequal burden of risks and harms. One of the foundational ideas of environmental justice is addressing these inequitable environmental risks carried by already marginalized groups in society. As discussed by David Schlosberg and Lisette Collins in their

summary article on environmental justice, the movement is rooted in combating the distributive inequities of environmental risks, starting with the 1982 case of PCB contaminated soil in a majority African American community in Warren County, NC (Schlosberg and Collins, 3). Piepzna-Samarasinha also addresses the economic inequities inherent in environmental issues, as it is the “working class folks and lower middle-class ones” that are forced to buy bottled water due to the dangerous water from the Blackstone river (Piepzna-Samarasinha, line 23). Beyond upfront economic costs of adapting to unsafe conditions, economically marginalized communities can struggle to muster the same amount of resources as wealthier groups, such as to challenge dumping sites, request for environmental recovery assistance, or petition for government protection. These injustices can increase the vulnerability of groups to future environmental risks in their community.

The poem (and the broader environmental justice movement) raises questions surrounding the authority and credibility of local leaders who are supposed to provide protection against environmental harms. The narrator addresses the harsh reality in her comment that “my mother could recite the thirty-three cancer-causing compounds in Worcester water,” clearly indicating that the water is toxic to health (Piepzna-Samarasinha, line 19). However, in the very next sentence, she points out “the city fathers insisted that the water was fresh and clean,” which given the descriptions of poison and pollution is clearly invalid (Piepzna-Samarasinha, line 20). This is a demonstration of how those in power have the ability to define the terms that in turn oppress marginalized communities. Beyond environmental justice, this theme rings true within disability circles that are working to change ableist language around how disability is perceived everyday in language, media, and law. Additionally, this situation, where a clear environmental health hazard exists, and yet local officials fail to listen to vulnerable populations, is echoed in accounts of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Residents seeking to clean up after the storm

were met with their topsoil being rejected by local landfills on account of contamination, while the EPA and LDEQ claimed the soil was not contaminated (Bullard et al., 128). The environmental justice movement calls for governments to respond in kind to environmental inequities. Both the cases of “Dirty River Girl” and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina reflect the need for this, specifically through pointing out the severe inadequacies of the current systems in place and inherent contradictions that ignore the human reality of the situation on the ground.

In addition to concerns over inequities in distribution of and protection from environmental risks, environmental justice recognizes that in the past, environmentalism has only meant wilderness protection. Now, environmental justice takes the human side of the equation into consideration. This is clear in Piepzna-Samarasinha’s poem, which also echoes disability thought on acceptance and humanity. “Dirty River Girl” ends with the narrator discussing a desire for the polluted body to still be known as beautiful, even if it is the result of violent environmental harm. She hopes for acceptance of “bodies [to be] beautiful just like they were” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, line 40). Without rescinding criticism of the inequitable system of environmental risks and protection from these risks, she resists washing away or fixing the bodies of both the river and those hurt by the environmental hazards. Disability activism shares this resistance to homogeneity for the sake of homogeneity and the washing away of identity. Importantly, both Piepzna-Samarasinha and disability activists clearly resist the idea of a cure or fixing differences between people. This is clear in the narrator’s inner discussion of what to do in the aftermath of the pollution of the river and people’s bodies: “To wash them clean? Nah — not washed clean” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, line 38). In just two short phrases, the poem reflects disability theory’s opposition to washing away and treating disability as though it never was.

Author Eli Clare frequently touches on these ideas of knowing a body as beautiful regardless of differences and disabilities. Disabilities of the body or mind do not need a

societally imposed cure of “restoration of health,” but rather a solution that “speaks from inside the intense contradictions presented by the multiple meanings of health” (Clare, 206). Clare and other disability thinkers emphasize that people are disabled by society, whether by physical barriers or by societal attitudes that create barriers in everyday life. With this reality also comes an emphasis on acceptance of so-called abnormality to what normal human physical or mental behavior is perceived as. Clare pushes back on pathology models of one normal, right, or healthy manner of human functioning as presented by Nick Walker in his article on neurodiversity (Walker, 3). Clare argues for the disabled to be accepted, not distanced as abnormal or unnatural, and that a cure is not the ultimate goal (Clare, 208). In a similar thread, “Dirty River Girl” reflects the same line of thinking in the narrator’s conclusion that the survivor bodies of the river and those harmed by environmental hazards need to be accepted as beautiful and loved.

In its reflection of both disability studies thinking on norms and its reflection of environmental justice principles, “Dirty River Girl” marks an important crossroads of these two fields of thought. Drawing from initial observations of environmental harms, Piepzna-Samarasinha constructs critiques of the inequities inherent in distribution of environmental harms and a government system that does not provide adequate protection from these risks, especially for vulnerable populations such as the disabled and other minority groups. Moving further towards the human aspect of environmental issues, the poem illustrates disability studies perspectives by stressing the value of individuality and resistance to a monoculture or cure to disability. Turning beyond the poem, Piepzna-Samarasinha’s reflections can serve as a broader lesson in the power and importance of incorporating diverse lines of thought to provide a deeper and more human analysis of issues in today's world.

## References:

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