

## Book Review:

# *The Intersectional Environmentalist*

Reviewed by Nicole Vankooten

**Book under Review:** Thomas, Leah (2022). *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet*. New York: Voracious / Little, Brown and Company.

**Reviewer:** Nicole Vankooten completed her Bachelor of Arts and Science from the University of Guelph in 2023. She is currently writing a master's thesis on the loss of medieval English forestry practices through colonialism and its legacies for modern Canadian forest management. As a Northern Ontario tree planter herself, Nicole hopes to use this research to introduce historical perspectives to conversations around sustainable forestry and ecologically responsible logging. In her free time, Nicole loves to camp, hike, and travel. She finds nature, and the forest specifically, as a crucial tool for resiliency in her own mental health journey.

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In a new era of our planet's history deemed the "Anthropocene" by many leading researchers, Leah Thomas's book *The Intersectional Environmentalist* reminds readers that humans and the environment coexist within myriad interconnecting cycles and systems. Social justice and environmentalism, the author argues, must come together to dismantle "the same systems of oppression that oppress people [and] also oppress and degrade the planet" (32). She names this movement "intersectional environmentalism," a name that builds on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1991). Using her book as an educational starting point, Thomas expertly combines thorough investigative research with her lived experiences as a Black woman and social justice advocate to compel her audience to think critically about the natural and political ecosystems that surround them. She actively critiques the historical and ongoing exclusion of key voices in environmental justice efforts using global case studies to exemplify the demand for intersectionality within environmentalism. *The Intersectional Environmentalist*, the book, is a vital start to approaching the ambitious goals of intersectional environmentalism, the movement, as Thomas delivers an achievable how-to guide for her readers to integrate this school of thought into their own lives.

Furthermore, Thomas carves space for many other leaders of intersectional environmentalism within her book, further enhancing the diversity of perspectives for her broad readership. She skillfully weaves their voices within her narrative by including interview questions, primary source documents, and quotations from a range of global figures. Uplifting the voices of prominent intersectional figures, such as drag queen icon Pattie Gonia and the revolutionary Combahee River Collective, not only strengthens Thomas's key arguments but also distinguishes her movement's unique ability to unite different communities across the globe.

Chapter One "Intersectional Theory, Feminism + Intersectional Environmentalism" provides an informative historiography of the necessary background leading up to the intersectional environmentalist movement. Thomas opens her readers to an alternative narrative of predominantly white-led feminism movements categorized by three "waves" in recent North American history. The author, unfortunately, missed an opportunity to discuss recent and emerging research among gender studies scholars that critiques the use of "waves" when describing feminist history. Nancy Hewitt's influential book *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism* (2010), for example, questions the validity of the wave metaphor when writing women's and social history.

While Thomas does touch on the exclusion of Black feminists from such history, a deeper analysis of the ongoing conversation regarding the harms of perpetuating the “wave” narrative would further educate her readers on intersectional theory. Kathleen A. Laughlin (2010) and her colleagues similarly challenged the wave model of feminism to achieve a more diverse narrative that includes the experiences of people of colour, working classes, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Acknowledging this important discussion would strengthen Thomas’s assertion of the need to adapt outdated notions of “environmentalism” using intersectional theory by similarly tracing the role of intersectionality in creating more inclusive narratives of women’s studies, gender history, and social justice.

*The Intersectional Environmentalist* deserves abundant recognition for its creative and informative methods of conveying the author’s message in an accessible way. The author excellently blends primary source analysis with her call to action using key excerpts from documents such as the *Principles of Environmental Justice from the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit* (1991). The tone shifts from Chapter Two onward as the author begins to move away from historiographical writing into a less formal and more personal approach to conveying the intersections that exist between social and environmental justice. Here, Thomas provides her readers with the how-to guide promised in the title of her book. She uses Intersectional Environmentalist Pledges to conclude each chapter and outline achievable ways to instigate change. These pledges represent *The Intersectional Environmentalist*’s incredible ability to encourage an audience to interact with the content of the book and actively situate it within their lived experiences. The author’s approachable and personal methodology contrasts other intersectional scholars such as Ande A. Nesmith et al. in *The Intersection of Environmental Justice, Climate Change, Community, and the Ecology of Life* (2021), who address more academic audiences.

The “Tool Kit” at the end of the book is a brilliant method to give readers a stepping stone into their individual research and education on intersectional environmentalism. The author claims this section intends to “deepen your understanding of intersectional environmentalism, and continue on your environmental journey” (137). Through the inclusion of exclusive interview content and links to additional educational media, the “Tool Kit” delivers on its intentions by allowing a diverse audience to engage with intersectional environmentalism in a manner tailored to their unique life experiences. Thomas’ continued dedication to providing resources and encouraging personal research throughout the book solidifies the author’s confidence in intersectional environmentalism to instigate change through education.

Through this book, Thomas undoubtedly establishes herself as a leader in social justice and environmentalism. *The Intersectional Environmentalist* is a remarkable book for those seeking to gain new insights into climate justice and environmental advocacy. The author’s accessible language and eye-catching format make this book enjoyable and educational while offering strong arguments for the need to include intersectional perspectives in the environmentalist movement. This guidebook-style narrative will certainly become an essential addition to personal bookshelves, classrooms, and syllabi around the globe.

## Works Cited

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour.” *Stanford Law Review* 43(6)1241–1299.

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