



## **Julie Sze (1973-present)**

Associate Professor

**University of California, Davis**

---

*"I take mentorship really seriously. It makes a huge difference." Julie Sze, 2009.*

---

### **Overview**

Julie Sze is a Professor and the Director of American Studies at UC Davis. She is also the founding director of the Environmental Justice Project for UC Davis' John Muir Institute for the Environment, and in that capacity is the Faculty Advisor for 25 Stories from the Central Valley. She received her doctorate from New York University in American Studies. Sze's research investigates environmental justice and environmental inequality; culture and environment; race, gender and power; and urban/community health and activism and has been funded by the Ford Foundation, the American Studies Association and the UC Humanities Research Institute. Sze's book, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*, won the 2008 John Hope Franklin Publication Prize, awarded annually to the best published book in American Studies. Her second book is called *Fantasy Islands: Chinese Dreams and Ecological Fears in an Age of Climate Crisis* (2015). She has authored and co-authored 35 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on a wide range of topics and has given talks in China, Abu Dhabi, Canada, Germany, France and Italy. Sze has been interviewed widely in print and on the radio: *World's Fair*, *MELDI*, *Newsweek*, *Asian Reporter*, and *Grist Magazine*.

*This interview was conducted in 2010.*

### **Early Life and Education**

Julie Sze was born and raised in Chinatown. Her upbringing in Chinatown, a place that few associated with nature, influenced her interest in environmental justice. Sze explains, "I think that is why environmental justice was appealing. It critiqued natural narratives of wilderness. The idea that the environment can be an urban environment was pretty mind-blowing."

As an undergraduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, Sze was introduced to environmental justice: she has very clear memories of Carl Anthony's course on race, poverty, and the environment. She says, "It was amazing and there were a lot of students at Berkeley who were interested

in these issues.” After earning a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of California, Berkeley in 1995, Sze returned to New York to work as an organizer on transportation justice issues.

Sze worked for two years with the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance on campaigns around transportation and health. Sze returned to school, earning a Ph.D. in American studies from New York University in 2003. While in graduate school, Sze is committed to being a scholar activist. She did not want to go to graduate school to be a professor; rather, graduate school gave her the opportunity to ask and answer interesting and important questions. She says, “I made my own pathway. I think most people who study what I study are not in American studies. They are in sociology or other departments. I have not felt hampered by this though. It gives me a different way of looking at problems. It makes my work very interdisciplinary. To me, it did not make sense to do it any other way. My cultural approach added something different.”

## Career

Sze is currently an associate professor of American studies at the University of California, Davis and also the founding director of the Environmental Justice Project of the John Muir Institute of the Environment. The Environmental Justice Project strives to promote environmental justice research in the Central Valley while increasing the visibility of environmental justice issues on campus. Sze feels very proud when she hears others mention that the University of California, Davis is a great place to do environmental justice work. She cites changing the perceptions of campus and creating a culture of engaged environmental justice research as one of the highlights of her career.

Being a scholar activist is not always easy though and Sze cites the importance of being transparent with communities over resources and power as one of the challenges. She says, “Being a professor at the University of California, Davis is different than being a graduate student supporting the movement. ...I have to understand my own privilege and institutional affiliation. .” To help herself through this challenge, Sze reminds herself that she is always trying to do the best work that she can and she takes a long-term perspective.

The opportunity to look at issues holistically has inspired Sze to remain in the environmental field. Further, the environmental perspective fits nicely with her worldview. “The environmental worldview of everything being connected is how I understand the world.” She cannot imagine doing anything else.

## Importance of Mentoring to Career

Sze has had many mentors and allies throughout different parts of her career. Dr. David Pellow, a faculty member at University of California, San Diego, has been an important mentor to Sze. He was instrumental in helping her publish her first book, *Noxious New York: the Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*. She also credits her colleagues in American Studies, “My colleagues in American Studies have been powerful allies because they care about progressive scholarship. They have intervened at all different times.” One of the ways they intervened was by nominating and awarding her book for the 2008 John Hope Franklin Publication Prize. It is an award presented annually for the best new book in American Studies. Receiving this award was important to Sze because it confirmed the importance and strength of her work. Finally, in 2003, Sze was awarded a University of California Office of the President’s

Post-doctoral Fellowship. This provided Sze with a network of women and minorities in the social sciences and humanities. She says, "I have always been really involved with the network. Every year I go back to the retreat."

### **Advice to Young Professionals**

Sze says, "I take mentorship really seriously. It makes a huge difference." As such, she enjoys mentoring others in a variety of ways. In addition to speaking to various audiences on the importance of diversity, she is also a mentor through the Undergraduate Research Mentorship program at the University of California, Davis. In addition, she employs at least one undergraduate student to assist her with her work each year. Past students have continued on to graduate and law school. Finally, when presented with opportunities to speak about diversity and environmental justice, Sze always accepts.

To minorities considering a career in the environmental field, Sze says, "This is a good time for them. It [the environment] is so central in a way that it wasn't in the past. The historical and cultural context is ripe."