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Anatomy of Environmental Racism

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Despite the many federal laws, mandates, and directives by the federal government to eliminate discrimination in housing, education, and employment, government rarely addresses discriminatory environmental practices. People of color (African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans) are disproportionately affected by industrial toxins, dirty air and drinking water, and the location of noxious facilities such as municipal landfills, incinerators, and hazardous-waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities.¹

Impact of Environmental Racism

All communities are not created equal. Some are subjected to all kinds of environmental assaults. Many differences in environmental quality between communities of color and white communities result from institutional racism. Institutional racism influences local land use, enforcement of environmental regulations, industrial facility siting, economic vulnerability, and where people of color live, work, and play. Environmental racism is just as real as the racism that exists in housing, employment, and education.

The roots of institutional racism are deep and difficult to eliminate.² Discrimination is a manifestation of institutional racism. Even today, racism permeates nearly every social institution. Environmental institutions of both governmental and nongovernmental bodies are no exceptions. Racism influences the likelihood of exposure to environmental and health risks as well as accessibility to health care.

People-of-color communities have borne a disproportionate burden of this nation’s air, water, and waste problems as well as the siting of sewer treatment plants; municipal
landfills; incinerators; hazardous-waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities; and other noxious plants. Residents of many of these same communities live in housing contaminated with lead, whose problems are further complicated by hospital closures and inaccessible health clinics.

People of color have been systematically excluded from (or allowed minimal participation in) decision-making boards, commissions, and staffs of governmental bodies. Business elites promote jobs, an expanded tax base, and economic development as selling points for local residents to accept risky industries. Jobs are often promoted over the environment, especially when the community discovers how many jobs are created, the skills required, the pay scale, and who will actually end up getting the jobs.

Environmental racism disadvantages people of color while providing advantages (i.e., privileges) for whites. A form of illegal exaction forces people of color to pay costs of environmental benefits for the public at large. Determining who pays and who benefits from our current urban and industrial policies is central to an analysis of environmental racism. Exclusionary zoning and unequal protection have created environmental sacrifice zones where residents pay with their health. Racial barriers in housing limit mobility options available to people of color.

Racism influences every social and economic strata of people of color. Moreover, environmental inequities do not result solely from differences in social class. In the United States, race interpenetrates class and creates special health and environmental vulnerabilities. People of color are exposed to greater environmental hazards in their neighborhoods and on the job than are their white counterparts. Studies find elevated exposure levels by race, even when social class is held constant. For example, research indicates race to be independent of class in the distribution of air pollution, contaminated fish consumption, location of municipal landfill and incinerators, abandoned toxic-waste dumps, and lead poisoning in children.

Lead poisoning is a classic example of an environmental health problem that disproportionately affects children of color at every class level. Lead affects between three and four million children in the United States—most of whom are African American and Latino Americans who live in urban areas. Among children five years old and younger, the percentage of African American children who have excessive levels of lead in their blood far exceeds the percentage of whites who do at all income levels.

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances Disease Registry (ATSDR) found that, for families earning less than $6,000, 68 percent of African American children had lead poisoning, compared with 36 percent for white children. In families with income exceeding $15,000, more than 38 percent of African American children suffer from lead poisoning, compared with 12 percent of whites. Even when income is held constant, African American children are two to three times more likely than their white counterparts to suffer from lead poisoning.

People of color do not have the same opportunities as whites to escape unhealthy physical environments. Most environmental-justice activists challenge an environmental ethic that allows individuals, workers, and communities to accept health risks others can avoid by virtue of their skin color. For example, African Americans, no matter what their educational or occupational achievement or income level, experience greater environmental threats because of their race.

Institutional barriers such as housing discrimination, redlining by banks, and residential segregation prevent African Americans from buying their way out of health-threatening physical environments. The ability of an individual to escape a health-threatening physical environment usually correlates with income. However, racial barriers complicate this process for millions of African Americans. An African American who has an income of $50,000 is as residentially segregated as an African American on welfare.

Some communities, located on the “wrong side of the tracks,” receive different treatment in the delivery of public services, including environmental protection. In the heavily populated South Coast air basin of Los Angeles, for example, over 71 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Latino Americans reside in areas with the most polluted air, while only 34 percent of whites live in highly polluted areas.

THE DUMPING GROUNDS

Apartheid-type housing and development policies limit mobility, reduce neighborhood options, diminish job opportunities, and decrease environmental choices for millions of Americans. Why do some communities get dumped on and others do not? Waste generation directly correlates with per-capita income. Therefore, public officials neither propose to locate many waste facilities in the suburbs.

The Commission for Racial Justice’s landmark study, Toxic Wastes and Race, found race to be the most important factor (i.e., more important than income, homeownership rate, and property values) in the location of abandoned toxic-waste sites. The study also found that three out of five African Americans live in communities with abandoned toxic-waste sites; 60 percent (fifteen million) African Americans live in communities with one or more abandoned toxic-waste sites; three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills are located in predominantly African American or Latino American communities, accounting for 40 percent of the nation’s total estimated landfill capacity; and African Americans are heavily overrepresented in the population of cities with the largest number of abandoned toxic-waste sites, a list that includes Memphis, St. Louis, Houston, Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta.

In addition to racial composition, economic factors combine to increase the likelihood of a community hosting a hazardous-waste incinerator. A 1990 Greenpeace report, Playing with Fire, found that the minority portion of the population in communities with existing incinerators is 89 percent higher than the national average; communities where incinerators are proposed have minority population 60 percent higher than the national average; average income in communities with existing
incinerators is 15 percent less than the national average; property values in communities close to incinerators are 38 percent lower than the national average; and in communities where incinerators are proposed, average property values are 35 percent lower.  

Garbage dumps are not randomly scattered across the landscape. These facilities are often located in communities that have high percentages of poor, elderly, young, and minority residents. In 1979, one of the first studies to link race with the location of municipal solid waste sites focused on Houston. From the early 1920s to the late 1970s, all of the city-owned municipal landfills, and six out of eight of the garbage incinerators, were located in African-American neighborhoods.

From 1970 to 1978, three out of four of the privately owned landfills that were used to dispose of Houston’s garbage were located in African American neighborhoods. Although African Americans made up only 28 percent of Houston’s population, 82 percent of the municipal landfill sites, public and private, were located in African American neighborhoods.

Siting inequity is not confined to Houston. African American communities from South Central Los Angeles to the southeast side of Chicago to West Harlem are vulnerable to waste facility siting. As recently as 1991, Residents Involved in Saving the Environment (RISE), a biracial community group challenged the King and Queen County, Virginia, Board of Supervisors for selecting a 420-acre site for a regional landfill, located in a primarily African American community. King and Queen County population is nearly evenly split between African Americans and whites. The group charged the board with racial discrimination in landfill siting and zoning since all three of the county-run landfills are located in predominantly African American communities.

In June, 1991, a U.S. district judge for the Eastern District of Virginia in RISE v. Kay ruled that the selection of the mostly African American area in King and Queen County did not violate the equal-protection clause, despite the county’s historical placement of landfills in African American areas. Although the court acknowledged that the placement of landfills in the county from 1969 to 1991 had a disproportionate impact on African American residents in the county, it failed to find discrimination.

Siting inequities are not unique only to facilities for dumping household garbage. The southern United States, our own Third World, is rapidly becoming the dumping ground for household garbage and hazardous waste. Historically, the South scored at or near the bottom on almost all indicators of well-being (e.g., education, income, economic development, environmental quality, and health care). The region has a long history of exploitation of land and people, especially African Americans, dating from slavery. There is a clear link between the region’s lax enforcement of regulations designed to protect public health and the environment, lax enforcement of laws designed to protect the civil rights of its African American citizens and race relations.

Findings in Dumping in Dixie show that African Americans in the South bear a disparate burden in the siting of hazardous-waste landfills and incinerators, lead smelters, petrochemical plants, and a host of other noxious facilities. South Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley” and Alabama’s “blackbelt” epitomize disparate waste facility siting.

Emelle, Alabama, hosts the nation’s largest commercial hazardous-waste landfill, dubbed the “Cadillac of dumps.” In Emelle, a rural community in the heart of Alabama’s “blackbelt,” African Americans make up over 90 percent of the population and 75 percent of the residents in Sumter County. The Emelle landfill receives wastes from Superfund sites and wastes from all forty-eight contiguous states.

Dallas, on the other hand, has a long history of allowing lead smelters to be sited in African American and Latino American neighborhoods. The dangers of lead have been known since the Roman era. The lead contamination problem in the mostly African American West Dallas neighborhood was documented by the Dallas Health Department as far back as 1969. A 1983 federal study established that the local smelter was the source of elevated blood lead levels in children who lived in West Dallas. Cleanup delays by the EPA has amounted to “waiting for a body count.” One wonders if the residents of the mostly white North Dallas neighborhoods would receive the same treatment as the residents of West Dallas.

Comprehensive cleanup activity began in the West Dallas site in January, 1992—nearly twenty years after the first published report of the problem. An estimated 30,000 to 40,000 cubic yards of lead-contaminated soil will be removed from several West Dallas sites, including school property and the yards of some private homes. The soil is scheduled to be dumped at the Magnolia landfill in Monroe, Louisiana, a community that is over 60 percent African American.

Siting inequities were identified by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) nearly a decade ago. After protests sparked by the siting of a PCB landfill in the mostly African American Warren County, North Carolina, the GAO initiated its own investigation of a hazardous waste facility siting in the EPA’s Region IV. The government agency found a strong relationship between the location of off-site hazardous-waste landfills and race and socioeconomic status of the surrounding communities in the EPA’s Region IV.

The GAO identified four off-site hazardous-waste landfills in the eight states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) that comprise the EPA’s Region IV. The four sites included Chemical Waste Management (Sumter County, Alabama), SCA Services (Sumter County, South Carolina), Industrial Chemical Company (Chester County, South Carolina), and the Warren County PCB landfill (Warren County, North Carolina). African Americans made up the majority of the population in three of the four communities with off-site hazardous-waste landfills.

In 1983, African Americans were clearly overrepresented in communities with waste sites since they made up only about one-fifth of the region’s population, and
three-fourths of the landfills were located in African American communities. Siting imbalances that were present in 1983 have not disappeared. In 1992, African Americans still make up about one-fifth of the population in Region IV. However, the two currently operating off-site hazardous-waste landfills in the region are located in ZIP codes where African Americans are a majority of the population.

CASE STUDIES FROM CALIFORNIA

African American communities in the southern United States are not the only communities of color experiencing environmental racism. In Los Angeles, for example, the mostly African American South Central Los Angeles and Latino American East Los Angeles neighborhoods were targets for municipal solid-waste and hazardous-waste incinerators, respectively.

Los Angeles, the nation's second largest city (with a population of 3.5 million persons) is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse cities in the United States. People of color—Latinos, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, African Americans, and Native Americans—now constitute 63 percent of the city's population. Eight of every ten of the city's African Americans and about half of Los Angeles's Latino Americans live in segregated neighborhoods. The now riot-torn South Central Los Angeles is one of these segregated enclaves that has suffered from years of systematic neglect, infrastructure decay, high unemployment, poverty, and heavy industrial use.

The South Central Los Angeles neighborhoods suffer from a double whammy of poverty and pollution. A recent article in the San Francisco Examiner described the ZIP code in which South Central Los Angeles lies (90058) as the "dirtiest" in the state. The 1990 population in the ZIP code is 59 percent African American and 38 percent Latino American. Abandoned toxic-waste sites, freeways, smokestacks, and waste water pipes from polluting industries saturate the one-square-mile area. The neighborhood is a haven for nonresidential activities. More than eighteen industrial firms in 1989 discharged more than 33 million pounds of waste chemicals in this ZIP code.

Why has South Central Los Angeles become the dumping ground of the city? Local government decisions are in part responsible. Trying to solve them, the city (under a contract with the EPA) developed a plan to build three waste-to-energy incinerators. Odgen-Martin was selected to build the incinerators dubbed LANCER (Los Angeles Energy Recovery). The first of the three incinerators, LANCER 1, was slated to be built in South Central Los Angeles.

Proponents of LANCER 1 attempted to speed the project through and locate it in South Central, as one way to blunt public opposition when LANCER 2 and 3, planned for the wealthier and mostly white Westside and San Fernando Valley came up for review. City officials reasoned that they would be hard-pressed to justify killing LANCER 2 and 3, if LANCER 1 was up and running. City council members, however, underestimated the organizing skills of South Central Los Angeles residents.

After learning about the incinerator project in 1984, residents organized themselves in a group called Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, most of whom were African American women. Local activists from Concerned Citizens were able to form alliances with several national and grass-roots environmental groups, as well as with public-interest law groups to block the construction of the city-initiated municipal solid-waste incinerator. Concerned Citizens was assisted by Greenpeace, the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, the Center for Law in the Public Interest, the National Health Law Program, the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, the California Alliance in Defense of Residential Environments (CARE), and a group called Not Yet New York. Opponents applied pressure on city officials, including Mayor Tom Bradley. In 1987, the mayor and the Los Angeles city council killed the LANCER project—a project that had included a commitment of $12 million.

Just as Los Angeles's largest African American community was selected for the city's first state-of-the-art municipal solid-waste incinerator, the state's first state-of-the-art hazardous-waste incinerator was slated to be built near East Los Angeles, the city's largest Latino American community. Officials of the California Thermal Treatment Services (CTTS) planned the hazardous-waste incinerator for Vernon, an industrial suburb that has only 96 people. Estimates indicated that the incinerator would burn about 22,500 tons of hazardous waste per year.

Several East Los Angeles neighborhoods, made up mostly of Latino Americans, are located only a mile and downwind from the proposed hazardous-waste incinerator site. The Vernon incinerator was intended to be the "vanguard of the entire state program for the disposal of hazardous waste." Residents of East Los Angeles questioned the selection of their community as host for the state's first hazardous-waste incinerator. Opponents of the incinerator saw the project as just another case of industry dumping on the Latino American community.

Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) led the opposition to the Vernon incinerator. MELA consisted of Latino American women who had originally organized against the state's plan to locate a prison in East Los Angeles.

MELA targeted the South Coast Air Quality management District (AQMD), the California Department of Health Services (DHS), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)—agencies responsible for awarding permits for the hazardous waste incinerator. MELA, like its South Central Los Angeles counterpart, was also able to garner allies to oppose the government-sanctioned hazardous-waste incinerator. MELA and its allies pressured CTTS through a lawsuit and the passage of a more stringent California state law requiring environmental impact reporting on hazardous-waste incinerators.

In 1988, as CTTS was about to start construction on the project, AQMD decided that the company should conduct environmental studies and redesign the original plans because of the new, more stringent state clean-air regulations. CTTS challenged the AQMD's decision up to the state supreme court and lost. In May, 1991, CTTS
decided to withdraw because the lawsuits threatened to drive the costs beyond the $4 million the company had already spent on the project. The incinerator was not built.

The other California community slated for a state-of-the-art hazardous-waste incinerator is Kettleman City, a rural farm-worker community of about twelve hundred residents. Because of their work, residents are exposed to dangerous pesticides. Moreover, the city is home to a Chemical Waste Management hazardous-waste landfill, California's largest hazardous-waste landfill.18

In 1991, the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, a public-interest law group, filed a class-action lawsuit, El Pueblo Para el Aire y Agua Limpio (People for Clean Air and Water) v. County of Kings. The lawsuit challenged the environmental-impact report in its use of English as the only language used to communicate risks to local residents when 40 percent of the residents speak only Spanish, and for its operating hazardous-waste incinerators in mostly minority communities. In 1992, a Superior Court judge overturned the Kings County board's approval of the incinerator, citing its impact on air quality and agriculture.36

THREAT TO NATIVE AMERICAN LANDS

As environmental regulations have become more stringent in recent years, Native American lands have become prime targets for garbage imperialism. Native American lands pose a special case for environmental protection.37 Because of the special quasi-sovereign status of Indian nations, companies have attempted to skirt state regulations that are often tougher than the federal regulations.

The threat to Native American lands exists from Mohawk property in New York to Campos land in California.38 More than three dozen reservations have been targets for landfills and incinerators. Nearly all these proposals have been defeated or are under review. In 1991, for example, the Choctaws in Philadelphia, Mississippi, defeated a plan to locate a 466-acre hazardous-waste landfill in their midst.39 In the same year, a Connecticut-based company that had never operated a municipal landfill proposed to build a 6,000-acre municipal landfill on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota. The project was later tagged "Dances with Garbage."40 The Good Road Coalition, an alliance of grassroots groups, led a successful campaign that derailed the proposal to build the giant municipal landfill on Sioux lands.

CONCLUSION

A new form of grass-roots environmental activism has emerged in the United States that emphasizes securing environmental justice for communities of color. Knowing that environmental racism is a major barrier to achieving environmental and economic justice for people of color, grass-roots activists have not limited their attacks to noxious facility siting and toxic contamination issues. Instead they have begun to seek change in destructive industrial production processes, wasteful consumptive behavior, urban land use and transportation, spatial housing patterns and residential segregation, redlining, and other environmental problems that threaten public safety.

People-of-color groups have begun to build a national movement for environmental justice. However, a national policy is needed to address environmental problems that disproportionately affect people-of-color, working class, and low-income communities. All communities deserve to be protected from the ravages of pollution. No one segment of society should have to bear a disparate burden of the rest of society's environmental problems.

Finally, pushing "risky" technologies and "dirty" industries off on people as a form of economic development is not a solution to the underdevelopment in impoverished Third World–like communities in this country and in similar communities around the world. Social-justice and equity goals must be incorporated into all levels of environmental decision making and policy formulation.

NOTES

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.


17. Ibid., 18–19.


22. See Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*, chapter 1.


