

## Aufsatz

# Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The environmental justice movement emerged as a direct response to the environmental racism experienced by African Americans in their communities and workplaces. As a result of environmental racism black bodies have been shunted to inequitable spaces where pollution and contamination hazards threaten to endanger individual lives and disrupt communities. The paper investigates how the emergence of the environmental justice movement has sought to counteract the threat and evinced a new consciousness.

*Keywords:* environmental racism, environmental justice, grassroots activism

The environmental justice movement has evolved because hazardous industrial activities often enabled by discriminating decision-making policies or simple neglect by the policymakers and industrial players imperil minority communities, i.e., primarily, communities of color, and low-income communities (Taylor 2014, 1). It suggests that “the environmental laws were themselves racist in their implementation and application” (Lazarus 2000, 260). As a result, many such communities have suffered from environmental disparities, which have caused health and environmental risks in their communities and at their workplaces (see Bullard 1993a, 10). Since communities of color have been targeted by environmental hazards, the phenomenon has come to be realized as *environmental racism*. The present

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paper intends to show how environmental racism is connected to the disposability of bodies and waste siting and how it triggered a new African American consciousness.

## **Environmental Racism**

Benjamin F. Chavis's coinage of environmental racism became emblematic in launching the movement during the Warren County protests against hazardous waste siting in 1982. As he later defines it,

Environmental racism impacts the quality of life where people live, work, and play. Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the presence of life-threatening poisons and pollutants in communities of color, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the environmental movement. (Chavis 1994, xi-xii)

Environmental racism means no simple discrimination, whereby people of color are segregated both in rural and urban spaces through ghettoization, redlining, or zoning, but the deliberate pollution and contamination of these communities through waste siting and other issues including poor housing quality and workplace safety. The historical interrelation of environmental racism and internal colonialism reveals thus the link between environmental and social issues, i.e., the intersection of race, class, and environment, with race being “a potent predictor of where people live [...] perpetuat[ing] unequal environmental quality in communities of color and white communities” (Bullard 1993a, 11). Further than that, it denotes the deterioration of geographic, social, and procedural equity (see Bullard 1990, 116). The term describes segregation and displacement through shunting to definite spaces and simultaneous subjugation and dehumanization in those spaces. The racialization in/through space is what is regarded as internal colonialism referring to the historical colonial dynamics within American society as “a *geographically-based* pattern of subordination of a differentiated population” (Pinderhughes 2011, 236) with the result of “*systematic* group inequality” including underdevelopment, institutional racism, and “economic dependency” (Gutiérrez 2004, 286-7).

Chavis refers to the unequal allocation of environmental quality, i.e., the lack of “*distributive justice*, referring to the distribution of environmental quality among different communities” (Holifield 2001, 81), which involves “enduring residential segregation,” “massive educational inequality,” “sweeping suppression through imprisonment,” and “profound health disparities” (Pinderhughes 2011, 236). The exclusion from or underrepresentation in policy-making leads to the deterioration of “*procedural justice*, referring to the access of citizens to decision-making processes that

affect their environments” (Holifield 2001, 81) with the result that the lack of “equal concern and respect” (Kuehn 2000, 10688) impairs procedural equity.

Environmental racism is closely connected to how people of color are identified as unclean and, therefore, separable, isolable, and disposable. The binary separation rigidly secludes colored bodies in space based on “the social and cultural constructions of race and hygiene” (Zimring 2015, 4). When David R. Goldfield asserts that there is a “direct historical connection between the exploitation of the land and the exploitation of people, especially black people” (1987, 211), it can be read that the exploitation of land also entails burdening the land with landfills and siting with waste and, in a parallel fashion, bodies deployed, i.e., shunted, in those areas can be taken as waste siting—one form of exploitation of people of color. For Carl A. Zimring it signifies the “cultural constructions of waste and race” (2015, 222), which have evolved throughout American history so that

[racist constructions] posited that white people were somehow cleaner than non-white people. This assumption defined white supremacist thinking. Its evolution shaped environmental inequalities that endure in the twenty-first century, including in the marketing of cleaning products, the organization of labor markets handling wastes, and the spatial organization of waste management and residential segregation in the United States. (Zimring 2015, 3)

The ethical and moral definition of cleanliness and hygiene has thus been expanded to encompass the interpretation of bodies and the fear of pollution has driven the American society to define racial purity. Conceptualizing it as a “presence-absence dichotomy,” Lewis R. Gordon palpably describes white American aversion:

The morphologically white man standing next to us may be “polluted” by an aetiology of blackness. He may have, for instance, “a drop of black blood” (a dreaded element of an antiblack world). Such “knowledge” has an impact on who or what he is perceived to be in his totality. His flesh becomes “black flesh”; his thoughts, “black thoughts”; his “presence” a form of absence—white absence. (1997, 71)

The “historic stigmatization” (Mills 2011, 84) is also reified in spatial terms. The presence-absence dichotomy, in this way, is rather to be conceptualized as deindividuation through seclusion and “other-reification” (see van Leeuwen 2008, 50) through contamination. As Margaret T. Hicken insists, “through direct state action as well as inaction in the face of risks, we sacrifice segregated Black neighborhoods and use the bodies of Black Americans as environmental sinks” (2021, 51). In the function of value and disposability (Hicken 2021, 52), environmental racism challenges the neoliberal biopolitics of disposability (see Giroux 2008, 592)—both in the sense of valuelessness as the deterioration of equity and as the management of bodies. African American environmentalism, as Charles W. Mills reminds

us, “has to mean not merely challenging the patterns of waste disposal, but also, in effect, their own status as the racialized refuse, the black trash, of the white body politic” (2001, 89).

### **Sources of the Environmental Justice Movement**

The environmental justice movement is to be distinguished from the environmental movements which have their roots in the 19th century, targeting conservation with the result of the establishment of national parks in the early 20th century or, more recently, pollution, contamination, and climate change. An important turning point was the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 about synthetic insecticides termed by her as “elixirs of death” (2002, 13) causing immense damage to the surrounding environment. The relevance of the book lies in that it “raised public awareness and concern for living organisms, the environment and the inextricable links between pollution and public health” (earthday.org). The book contributed greatly to the growth of environmental consciousness peaking in the first Earth Day in 1970, as a result of “a national environmental teach-in” (Rome 2013, 56) and contributing to the birth of a new eco-infrastructure (Rome 2013, 209) that determined green action afterward. Much as organizers like Stephen Cotton with a civil rights activist background (Peterson 2020) were aware of the intricate interrelation of race and environmental issues, believing that “*blighted neighborhoods, smog, dirty water, lead paint, and poor housing* conditions were environmental issues” (Peterson 2020), and the Council on Environment established recognized that “minority communities experienced disproportionately high levels of environmental risk” (Hines 2001, 777), the racial/racist background of the environmental problems were not in the foreground.

While the environmental concern remained a focus for the environmental justice movement, one founding reason was that mainstream environmentalists failed to pay adequate attention to environmental issues concerning communities of color (McGurty 2009, 5) and thereby they neglected the interrelation of race and environmental degradation. Ultimately focusing on the social aspect of environmental issues environmental justice thinkers and activists came to identify environmental degradation as a civil rights issue. In looking for new vistas for the Civil Rights Movement, Ben Chavis maintains that “One of the responsibilities of the Civil Rights Movement is to define the postmodern manifestations of racism” (Norment 1993, 78). Thus, in a certain way, rejuvenating the Civil Rights Movement, environmental justice thinkers and activists consider environmental injustice as a form of racism, having identified a “new frontier” of the movement (Bryant and Mohai 2019).

Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster identify diverse sources of the environmental justice movement. While traditional environmentalists represented the commendable concepts of preservation and conservation, promoting “wise stewardship” (2001, 29), they often excluded African Americans from their ranks at the same time (2001, 29). As Cole and Foster argue, the environmental justice movement can be seen as a “challenge to traditional environmental groups” (2001, 31). The fight against social injustice is undoubtedly rooted in the African American experience of slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow system, but, more immediately, the activist methodology of Civil Rights was adopted and action augmented by the Black Church (2001, 21). The leading role of the Black Church in fighting environmental racism has been immense as it has been propelling environmental action in diverse ways including actions organized, the thorough national reports of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice published in 1987 and 2007 respectively, the National Black Church Environmental Summit organized by the National Council of Churches in 1993 (see Pinn 2016, 312) and the works of theologians such as James H. Cone or Dwight N. Hopkins. The Anti-Toxics Movement is another source Cole and Foster list—a movement starting in the 1960s to fight toxic waste siting and to promote pollution prevention (2001, 23). The movement, which was characteristic of white working-class and middle-class layers (Brulle and Pellow 2006, 111), targeted the use of pesticides, toxic waste siting (as in the Love Canal protest in 1978), and incineration (Leonard 2011, 18-19). The principle of self-determination as a central philosophy of the Native American struggle (Cole and Foster 2001, 27) had a considerable impact on the formation of the movement. However, beyond the principle of self-determination, the struggle also professes a worldview. As Dina Gilio-Whitaker expresses, “Native resistance is inextricably bound to worldviews that center not only the obvious life-sustaining forces of the natural world but also the respect accorded the natural world in relationships of reciprocity based on responsibility toward those life forms” (2019, 13). Especially in view of African American eco-theologians, it can be argued that resistance is as spiritual as it is political. This is also true for Cesar Chavez’s farm-worker movement (León 2015, 118), whose struggle for better work conditions targeted health and safety issues (Cole and Foster 2001, 27). His movement also served as a successful example, for example, for grassroots organizing (Pawel 2009, xi).

Academic findings have served with lobbying, research, and expertise (Cole and Foster 2001, 24-25) as a further major source for the movement. Starting in the early 1970s with studies concerning environmental quality and pollution among others (see Brulle and Pellow 2006, 105), inquiries grew rapidly in number to study the interrelation of race and environmental pollution and contamination. Beyond the report of 1987 pointed out above,

Brulle and Fellow emphasize Robert D. Bullard's pioneer research and the joint research of Paul Mohai and Bunyan Bryant that set the context for subsequent inquiries. Bullard's 1990 study, *Dumping in Dixie* accounts for the complexity of environmental injustice, proving that "blacks, lower-income groups and working-class persons are subjected to a disproportionately large amount of pollution and other environmental stressors in their neighborhoods as well as in their workplaces" (2), partly because of insufficient or no representation undergirding the economic and political decision-making logic of the "path of least resistance" (3).

It follows from Bullard's analysis that while siting inevitably tends to disregard the rights and interests of multiply disadvantaged groups, the logic of economic planning involving the consideration of multiple factors such as accessible transport infrastructures can underlie the neglect—consciously or unconsciously—of such rights and interests. The problem entails also the logic of capitalism, which, in many ways, appears to go beyond racism. In the supply-and-demand scheme and profit-oriented economic logic based on profit enhancement and cost efficiency, humans in general, but people of low socio-economic status in underdeveloped areas (see, for example, Nagy 2019 for Hungary), people of color specifically in the American context, and third-world disadvantaged groups for the intersectionality of race, class, and geographical location, fall victim to economic figures. The deterioration of land—depressed and devalued—invites investment for representing less value and more availability—a reason why it is accessible for the poor and minority layers, as industries look for "operation space" (Bullard 1990, 29) in terms of plant construction, land exploitation—also meaning siting—, and the exploitation of citizens living there, since "polluting industries exploit the pro-growth, pro-jobs sentiment exhibited among the poor, working-class, and minority communities" (1990, 29) even if "there is little or no correlation between proximity of industrial plants in communities of color and employment opportunities of nearby residents" (1990, 135). Bullard proves, in this way, the interrelation of the exploitation of land and people of color historically in America (1990, 28). Expanding the scope of the problem to global levels in other writings, while still focusing on people of color, Bullard maintains the systemic indifference of a global system when he establishes that "an inherent conflict exists between the interests of capital and that of labor" (Bullard 1993b, 23).

Mohai and Bryant organized the Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards at the University of Michigan in 1990, which fueled the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, which articulated the *17 Principles of Environmental Justice*. Mohai and Bryant found that "environmental racism is not confined to hazardous waste alone" and identified "a consistent pattern of environmental racism" (1995, 11). The conference and the proceedings *Race and the Incidence of*

*Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse* (1992) influenced future policymaking and research.

### **Race, Class, and the Environment**

Even though the environmental justice movement gained force in the 1980s, there were protests previously, especially in the 1960s that can be considered as direct antecedents. Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster call attention to preceding events including the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis with the seminal role of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 (2001, 19-20) that mark the emerging conscientization of environmental injustices in communities of color. However, it was not until 1982 when protests began against polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) landfills in Warren County, North Carolina, with "high poverty and illiteracy levels and a large African-American population" (Gottlieb 2005, 339) that the movement unfolded. Eileen McGurty insists that the massive Warren County demonstrations contributed to the environmental justice movement in multiple ways significantly: arrests for civil disobedience, concerted community action against agencies, and nationwide activism "signaled the transformation in environmental ideas and practice" (2009, 7).

From this founding moment on, the movement has solidified substantially with existing organizations expanding to incorporate environmental justice issues, new organizations to address community-based problems, as well as alliances (Johnston 1994, 228) triggering the "institutionalization of environmental justice" (Holifield 2001, 79) and the production of widespread grassroots activism and numerous studies and reports hastening the change of the legal framework.

As one such instance, in 1987 the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice published a nationwide report, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, "to comprehensively document the presence of hazardous wastes in racial and ethnic communities throughout the United States" (Chavis 1987, ix). As Benjamin F. Chavis Jr., then head of the commission, states in the report, "[the] investigations led us to examine the relationship between the treatment, storage and disposal of hazardous wastes, and the issue of race" (1987, ix). The findings of the report suggest that race is a major factor in the siting of hazardous materials, verifying "the existence of clear patterns which show that communities with greater minority percentages of the population are more likely to be the sites of [hazardous waste] facilities" (1987, xv). At the same time, however, the report also states based on its findings that "Although socio-economic status appeared to play an important role in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities, race still proved to be more significant" (1987, xiii). The 2007 repeated

anniversary study, *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty 1987-2007*, verified the findings, proving again that race is “a significant and robust predictor” (2007, xi) of unequal protection still in the 21st century. Both reports proved that environmental degradation has a social and ethnic/racial stratum. In the intersection of these, as the findings suggest, it is race that proves most significant with spatial separation reasserting the Jim Crow concept of separate and unequal as “racial segregation continues to be the dominant residential pattern” (Bullard 1993a, 7) then and today. The problem persists: a recent longitudinal analysis shows that race remains an independent predictor of waste siting (Mascarenhas, Grattet, and Mege 2021, 121) and “that over time polluting industries still follow the path of least resistance, choosing to locate where land, labor, and lives are deemed to be cheaper and expendable” (Mascarenhas, Grattet, and Mege 2021, 121). It remains a fact that economic logic and governmental policies palpably highlight environmental racism.

The movement has reached no little results, though. Beyond the considerable plethora of research by now, relevant reports have been published like the annual environmental justice reports by the Environmental Protection Agency, the Executive Order 12898 of 1994 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations) was signed, and relevant legislation has been passed. Environmental Justice Act of 2021 was developed to “require[] agencies to address and mitigate the disproportionate impact of environmental and human health hazards on communities of color, indigenous communities, and low-income communities resulting from agencies’ programs and policies” (Congress.gov). The landmark legislation seeks to eliminate environmental disparities by securing the individual right to sue in federal court (Lam and Imperiale 2022). The steadfast grassroots work has also enabled alliances. Whereas initially black environmentalists were typically excluded from the mainstream environmental movement, by 1993 Bullard reported that

Many environmental activists of color are now getting support from mainstream organizations in the form of technical advice, expert testimony, direct financial assistance, fundraising, research, and legal assistance. In return, increasing numbers of people of color are assisting mainstream organizations to redefine their limited environmental agendas and expand their outreach by serving on boards, staffs, and advisory councils. Thus, grassroots activists have been the most influential in placing equity and social justice issues onto the larger environmental agenda and democratizing and diversifying the movement as a whole. (Bullard 1993b, 39)

The struggle for equity is, by definition, a struggle for something. The movement’s grassroots, community-based activist approach has found ways to strengthen the community, empowering them to fight for community self-determination (Cole and Foster 2001, 16). Beyond fighting “broader consequences” of economic, social, and cultural nature “[t]he movement for



environmental justice is also about creating clean jobs, building a sustainable economy, guaranteeing safe and affordable housing, and achieving racial and social justice” (17). In this way, the struggle of the environmental justice movement against environmental racism is about building, protecting, and preserving the community.

## Conclusion

The advent of the environmental justice movement reveals the potential of the African American community to refocus identity politics regardless. As it was evident during the Civil Rights movement previously, the struggle for environmental justice has shown again that the African American community’s resistance to fixity as victimization through radical deindividuation, spatial seclusion, and contamination reasserts the presence of an individuating complexity. It follows then that black environmentalism can be seen as part of “the struggle to obtain meaning through a process of ‘becoming’” (Pinn 2003, 159). For Pinn, the process is the denotation of a complex subjectivity, which challenges “historical identity,” “the existential pain,” and “embraces a new consciousness” (2003, 159). The latter has changed the African American community significantly. As Cole and Foster assert, “The community is transformed by the grassroots environmental justice groups established amid environmental struggles. These groups help to transform marginal communities from passive victims to significant actors in environmental decision-making processes” (2001, 14). The transformation points well beyond environmental awareness, as, through a consciousness of environmental equity, it has reinvigorated the historical quest for identity.

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