

Race, Racism and the Environment

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Where the Whale Be At?

The Place of Race & Racism in the Discussion of Environmentalism

The only solution to pollution is the people's humane solution.

-Bobby Seale, Co-Founder of the Black Panther Party

Okay, let's get this straight right off. I'm an English teacher whose specialization is African American literature. If environmentalism comes up in class, invariably, someone will ask, "What does that have to do with us?" While a common thought for most Americans, I suspect, this is especially poignant coming from students studying African American literature. The issues are usually racism, the proverbial "glass ceiling," economics, and equal opportunity regarding justice, healthcare and education. What can be said for People of Color when it comes to why they should concern themselves with environmentalism?

A lot actually, though it's only alluded to in Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. A picture book not worthy of college students, it contains a few images of Chinese and Indian farmers, and makes mention of Katrina. I felt more tremors when Kanye West came on MTV and announced that Katrina's aftermath occurred because "President Bush doesn't care about Black people." "Noooooo," I shouted; not because I didn't believe it, but because of the ramifications of his saying it while people were still stranded in, or trying to get back to New Orleans.

So why should People of Color be concerned about the environment? Well, historically, most communities start out as farm communities. Because of this, people learn to live in close contact with the land. As Native American Chief Seattle stated in 1851 when ceding land to encroaching Whites:

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to him as the next. For he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The Earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his father's grave behind, and he does not care. He kidnaps the Earth from his children, and he does not care. His father's grave and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the Earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the Earth and leave behind only a desert.

Native Americans are similar in their attitude of respect to many Peoples of Color. Most human groups began as hunting (for what they needed) and farming communities. As bell hooks (a.k.a. Gloria Jean Watkins), an African American social critic, reminds us:

Living in modern society, without a sense of history, it has been easy for folks to forget that black people were first and foremost a people of the land, farmers. It is easy for us to forget that at the first part of the 20th century, the vast majority of black folks in the United States lived in the agrarian South.

But, as my students would say, this is “ancient,” or this is “old school history.” “What’s the relevance for us today?” Chill, here’s the dealio. There are a number of psychiatrists and psychologists who argue that a disconnect with the land promotes a disconnect in family structure. In other words, those peeps who come from a rural community lose sight of their values in the cities. Certainly, writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar (*Sport of the Gods*) and August Wilson (*The Piano Lesson*, *Fences*) would agree. But this stuff seems existential. It’s not something that would force one to focus on environmental issues. Actually, the only way to get people to think about such issues is to hit them where it hurts; where they are today.

Consider this:

- Lead poisoning continues to be the number one environmental health threat to children of color in the United States. (Recent studies suggest that a young person’s “lead burden” is linked with delinquency, lower IQ, and lower graduation rates.)
- Nationally, three out of five African and Latino Americans live in communities with abandoned toxic waste sites.
- The U.S. General Accounting Office (a.k.a. Government Accountability Office) estimates that there are between 130,000 and 450,000 abandoned waste sites (called “brownfields”) located in or near low-income, working-class, People of Color communities.
- Over 870,000 of the 1.9 million housing units for the poor sit within a mile of factories that reported toxic emissions to the Environmental Protection Agency.
- More than 600,000 students – mostly African American – in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Michigan, and California, attend public schools located within one-half mile of state-identified contaminated sites.
- Seventy-one percent of African Americans live in counties that violate federal air pollution standards (and hey, we’re only thirteen percent of the country) as opposed to 58 percent of White Americans.

So you say, “Yo, Terry, that’s all good, but those are large numbers. How does this affect me?” Okay, you selfish “I don’t think about the thousands, but I’m curious and shitless when it comes to me.” Let me help you out.

African Americans are particularly prone to the following killers (by the way, the Surgeon General and the American Medical Association have noted in several reports that People of Color usually receive outdated or less aggressive treatment for medical disorders than Whites, and that doctors are less likely to keep Black Americans alive if they fall into cardiac arrest during an operation.) heart disease, (Black women have a 70% greater chance of dying from this than White women), cancer, stroke (Black males who suffer a stroke have a 95% greater chance of dying than White males), AIDS, diabetes, pneumonia and influenza, chronic pulmonary diseases such as asthma and bronchitis, and infant mortality. All of which might be lessened if you had access to a grocery store. You’re laughing? How many of you use the mom and pop store or the bodega on the corner? You know why you use them? Because there are no grocery stores in your neighborhood that you can walk to.

Nationally, half of all neighborhoods comprised of People of Color lack access to a full-service grocery store or supermarket. What does this mean? Those are the places they sell organic vegetables, bread and meat, Folks. In the United States, predominantly White neighborhoods have four times more supermarkets than we do, and studies show that when there is a supermarket in the neighborhood, there’s a 32 percent increase in vegetable and fruit consumption. Eating organic food or at least more vegetables and fruit would decrease the medical disasters listed above.

By the way, Kanye was right, except for maybe Condoleeza. Katrina represents the epitome of environmental racism. And what exactly is environmental racism? The term refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities of color. So what Katrina did was present clear bonds between race, poverty, land use environmental risk, and unequal protection, some of which existed in the South before Katrina even made her presence known.

The U.S. poverty rate is 12.5 percent, Blacks, disproportionately poor, compose a significantly large share of the three Gulf Coast states hit hardest by Katrina: Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. New Orleans before Katrina was dealing with massive environmental and health concerns: more than 50 percent of the children living there had lead poisoning. An 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi River known as “Cancer Alley” that runs through Orleans and is one of the largest toxic waste sites in the country, didn’t help the living conditions. The poorest sections of Orleans are the low-lying areas. The areas hit especially hard by Katrina.

Katrina dumped over 63 million cubic yards of debris in Louisiana and 62.5 million cubic yards of debris in Mississippi. Health officials are now seeing a large number of returning evacuees afflicted with “Katrina Cough,” an illness believed to be linked with mold and dust spores in the air. Mold, particularly, is often a trigger of other respiratory diseases. And the clean-up of the area is still in its infancy.

Years earlier, in 1994, President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12898 requiring that all federal agencies address environmental justice to minority and low-income populations. The EPA, FEMA, and the Army Corps of Engineers still have not made use of this order to clean up and rebuild the Gulf Region. To their credit, other grassroots organization such as the West Harlem Environmental Action group (WE ACT), Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice (DWEJ) and the Louisiana Environmental Network (LEAN) have made use of Order 12898 in their quests to bring positive, renewing change to their communities.

I could end this by saying that just by being human, just because People of Color have been at the forefront of so many movements; we have an obligation to argue in favor of the environment. The sad fact is that many of us don't see the environment unless we turn on the Discovery Channel or the National Geographic Channel. There are 1.7 acres of park space for every 1,000 people in African American neighborhoods; contrast this with the fact that there are 31.8 acres for each person in predominantly White neighborhoods. Maybe you should go to the park, and sit really close to a White person.

Resources:

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Bullard, Robert D. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990.

Bullard, Robert D. *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005.

Clinton, William. "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, Executive Order No. 12898." *Federal Register*, 59, No. 32, February 11, 1994.

Commission for Racial Justice, Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites (New York: United Church of Christ, 1987).

The Covenant with Black America. New York: Third World Press, 2006.

Dyson, Michael. *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.

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Olden, Kenneth. "The Complex Interaction of Poverty, Pollution, Health Status." *The Scientist* 12:2 (1998):7.