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Cleora Ohar

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## **A Case of Environmental Racism in Los Angeles, California**

### *Abstract*

Environmental Racism has been around for a long time. Looking at its history of key movements like the Civil Rights Movement can help provide a framework for why it has become what it is today and could potentially look like in the future. The way in which people have presented it has changed as culture has changed. Not only does environmental racism involve issues of the environment, but it also includes issues of race. Hence, the name of this subcategory of environmental justice. In fact, studies have been conducted showing that those who live in underdeveloped or poor areas (where pollution, toxic waste, etc.) tend to be in the minority population or non-white (Latinos, etc.). Los Angeles has one of the highest populations of Hispanic and or Latino people in the USA. As such, many of the people in this population have faced issues related to environmental pollution, waste, etc. and have not gotten the help they needed to support these problems. The issue examined in this essay deals with the explosion at the Exide Battery Recycling Plant in Vernon, which is part of Los Angeles County in California. Those who are taking action against the environmental injustice seem to be the local people who are affected by the environmental hazards. The issues here, both environmental and social are very inherent and have been around for a long time and as such will not change unless action is taken against them.

### **Brief History of Environmental Justice through the Subtopic of Environmental Racism**

Environmental racism is a very significant topic especially since it involves many nefarious factors. The Hispanic community, like the African-American community in Flint, Michigan, is more likely to be affected by the consequences of an environmental disadvantage than white Americans. One mode of thought from The City Project in Los Angeles, shows that Hispanic people in general are concerned about climate change is because they disproportionately live in areas most heavily burdened for pollution and vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> The City Project, Natural Resources Defense Council, Los Angeles, 2015, <http://www.nrdc.org/ej/history/hej.asp,1>.

project aims at examining the overarching consequences of environmental inequality and how to improve the displacement of the Hispanic community. The Civil Rights movement has been integral in bringing many topics to light including environmental injustice. Much research has been conducted within the latter part of the 20th century until today on the subtopic of environmental justice, which is environmental racism. Several factors including political and socioeconomic, coupled with industrialization and disinvestment have segregated people of color, like in the case of African Americans.<sup>2</sup> These segregated communities and neighborhoods have the highest rate of urban poverty. These issues have been growing exponentially in small increments to the point where the problem has radiated to people around them. People have only begun to scrape the surface of the effects of environmental racism. The overall situation of race and its issues have definitely improved since Civil Rights movement. Despite this however, issues like environmental racism are still occurring.

Environmental racism still occurs because some (not all) people allow it to happen. They will look the other way or find excuse out of why they cannot help the situation. The name and frame in which environmental racism currently works is contemporary. However, it is not a new concept, rather, it has just been identified through the lens of each era that it has been through. For instance, during reconstruction, after the Civil War, the words racism and environment or environmental justice would not have been seen together. It is only recently have people used the terms as one coherent idea. The challenge moving forward is to work with the framework of environmental racism and all of its consequences as it exists. The water crisis in Flint, Michigan is one of the most recent and ongoing cases of environmental racism. A high majority of the citizens in the area are of African-American descent, who happens to be living in a low-income area. There has been much coverage on this particular case of environmental injustice. Every type of newscaster from CNN to local news has covered this ongoing issue. Different pages, communities, and other topics on the matter have been created on social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter.

Social media outlets such as these make it very easy to spread news like this relatively far because they are high profile and popular sources for people to utilize. As for literature, each

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Morello-Frosch and Russ Lopez, "The Riskscape and the Color Line: Examining the Role of Segregation in Environmental Health Disparities." *Environmental Research* 102, no. 2 (2006): 1, Elsevier, Inc. doi:10.1016/j.envres.2006.05.007. accessed February 15, 2016.

piece has examined different aspects of environmental racism. At the core of it, they focus on the topic of environmental justice. Many of these pieces of literature use real cases to enforce the framework and claims of environmental racism. It has taken time to recognize the long-term consequences of environmental injustice and in particular, environmental racism. Therefore, it will take time for people to conjure up more literature on these issues. As long as people continue to dredge up the consequences of environmental racism, there will be more social media highlights and literature to accommodate it. There will have to be a conversation or a movement of sorts to make the highlight of this issue so that it is less prevalent.

### **An Inquisitive Evaluation of Los Angeles' Environmental Racism Through the Ecological Thought Process**

The Flint water crisis is a current example of how people on the outside of this community can misconstrue what the people on the inside know to be true. The critical thinking approach, which Timothy Morton introduces in his book, *The Ecological Thought*, is important to understanding the environmental racism framework. Like with most other things, it is simplest to start from the beginning. Morton asks what the “real thing” is.<sup>3</sup> As one examines environmental racism further, one will constantly need to decipher what is real from what is not. If one does not or cannot tell the difference, it will be difficult to move forward with providing a framework for this subcategory of environmental justice. Furthermore, to understand environmental racism, one must put him or herself in this mindset. By putting one’s self into this mindset, one can provide a clearer framework for the tangible and non-tangible aspects of environmental justice. Immersing one’s self into the thing in which he or she is studying gives him or her a solid foundation from which to study environmental racism and all that relates to it. Part of this involves being extremely open-minded from the start, especially whenever a new idea or old idea (with a different twist) presents itself. This could include looking at the most obscure places one could imagine (ex. not expecting to see racism in an affluent area, etc.). For instance, Morton uses the Lakewood, Colorado residents’ objections to wind farms as an example for his critical thinking approach. These residents believe they are “spoiling the view” as opposed to the risk the wind farms have to birds, which others outside this community may

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.

believe.<sup>4</sup> Other residents in different parts of the USA like in Los Angeles, CA have objections to their neighborhoods but for other reasons.

Vernon, part of LA County in California, is one of many cities across the USA experiencing its own version of the Flint crisis. The Exide Battery Recycling plant in Vernon shut down and left precarious levels of lead in the soil. Not surprisingly, the community that lives this LA neighborhood is mostly minorities of Hispanic descent. In fact, many in the community have complained that the cleanup effort and general action to fix the issue are really slow.<sup>5</sup> Some people, like Amelia Vallejo, who lives in this LA community, have family members who suffer from serious health issues like lead poisoning.<sup>6</sup> One unforeseen complication of this lead contamination in the soil is exactly how long it will take to clean the mess from it. Preliminary results released back in 2015 were based on soil samples taken from 146 homes, spread over a two-square mile area.<sup>7</sup> As Morton would probably frame it, the negativity that has arisen from the lead contamination in this LA community, is more ecological than the positivity, which is very little for those most affected by the contamination in the community (lower income, Hispanic people).<sup>8</sup> The very ideas of negativity and positivity have to be included in the framework of environmental racism carefully so that one idea is not treated as better than the other. That would be categorizing the entirety of things as “black and white” (a dualistic way of interpreting environmental justice) when in reality, it must go beyond the act of putting things neatly into a two boxes. The situation in this LA community should, according to Morton, be all inclusive of the big ecological framework that one should be examining.

### **From the Past to the Future: The Legality of Los Angeles’ Environmental Inequality**

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<sup>4</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Bettina Boxall and Joe Mozingo, *After 10 years, neighbors of a Wilmington oil drilling operation still complain of health, environmental issues*, Los Angeles Times, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Mireya Villarreal, “Toxic mess near Los Angeles left dangerous levels of lead in soil,” *CBS Evening News*. February, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/toxic-mess-near-los-angeles-left-dangerous-levels-of-lead-in-soil/>.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Barboza, “Excide cleanup: Toxic lead removal could be California’s biggest yet,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-exide-cleanup-20150817-story.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 16.

Key milestones from the Civil Rights movement have been made in the quest to fight for justice in the ongoing issues with environmental racism. This modern environmental movement has evolved through three stages, each with goals, achievements, and principal actors.<sup>9</sup> The first stage began in the early twentieth century and prominent figures such as Theodore Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold led this part of the movement. The second part came during the late 1960s, wherein lawyers played the leading role in legal matters of environmental activism. Finally, the third stage began a decade later in the late 1970s and is still occurring today. In the early 1960s, Cesar Chavez, a Mexican-American union leader, fought for workplace rights and protection from harmful pesticides in the farm fields of California's San Joaquin Valley.<sup>10</sup> While great efforts like this have been enacted to promote justice, there continues to be issues of environmental inequality among the lower-income, minority populations like in parts of Los Angeles, CA. It will take careful, well-thought out plans in order to sift through the consequences that this community has faced.

There is, as Pope Francis would frame it, a need to incorporate the history and culture of ecology to preserve its original identity.<sup>11</sup> Before fixing the problem at hand in the Hispanic community, one must recognize its past to understand its future. The people within the Hispanic communities in Los Angeles and outside of it will have to work together to understand this frame of past and future in order to combat the issues of environmental injustice in these communities. In the framework of classic environmental justice politics, communities organize to defend themselves against present or future threats to human health and well being from industrial development and toxic contamination.<sup>12</sup> As environmental justice activism has progressed however, it challenges the old school mode of thought related to environmental justice. With this being the case, people have to be flexible to the idea of changing or discarding preconceived notions altogether.

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<sup>9</sup> Barry Hill, *Environmental Justice: Legal Theory and Practice, 3d: Legal Theory and Practice*, Environmental Law Institute, Washington, D.C., 2014, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Renee Skelton and Vernice Miller, *The Environmental Justice Movement*, Natural Resources Defense Council, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, Our Sunday Visitor, Vatican City, 2015, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Eric D. Carter, *Environmental Justice 2.0: New Latino Environmentalism in Los Angeles*, Local Environment, St. Paul, 2014, 5.

The toxic waste exposure that the Hispanic communities have faced in LA County is not only a matter of health, but poses a strong political message for all to see whether they realize it directly or not. The “politics of race,” one of the characteristics of framework in the USA, is evident in this poor community.<sup>13</sup> It is not a recent phenomenon for minority communities to be the target of poorer living conditions and socioeconomic status. What would be new is the way in which people could approach the issue in order to solve or improve it. In relation to this, Pope Francis has suggested that the disappearance of a culture can be just as serious as disappearance of plant or animal species.<sup>14</sup> The state of the Hispanic culture is at stake with environmental hazards if people let the situation play out as it has been. The politics of this issue is not going away anytime soon as long as people do nothing. Diversity awareness and cultural competency are important components for understanding how the politics of environmental racism will potential move forward.

### **Understanding Racial Sensitivity and Cultural Awareness Through Los Angeles’ Battery Plant Disaster**

The context of diversity awareness and cultural competency within the framework of environmental racism are a huge component to this element of environmental justice. This is due to the fact that they are major ideas that arise during a given case of environmental racism. The Los Angeles community is at the forefront of several American cities, which are confronting the social and economic issues brought on in part by globalization. In fact, the problem of environmental injustice became apparent during the 1980s in LA and reached an emergency level in many of the communities within this city during the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> The Latino residential neighborhoods in LA tended to be regular targets for citing industrial facilities, hazardous waste operations and other potentially hazardous land uses. The Exide Battery Recycling Plant disaster is no stranger to this known fact. It has definitely perpetuated the environmental injustice. In fact, a study was conducted, using the 1990 and 2000 census data and distance-based methods. The

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon Walker, *Environmental Justice: Concepts, Evidence, and Politics*, Routledge: Francis and Taylor Group, London, 2012, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Michele Prichard, Yuki Kidokoro, Bahram Fazeli, Manuel Pastor, Jim Sadd, and Rachel Morello-Frosch, *Building a Regional Voice for Environmental Justice*, 2004, 3.

purpose of this was to investigate the extent of racial and socio-economic disparities in the location of commercial hazardous waste sites.<sup>16</sup> This study concluded that race persists as a major predictor of hazardous waste facility locations when socio-economic factors are taken into account.

In addition to living near environmental wastelands, there are a lack of park in communities of color in Los Angeles.<sup>17</sup> This was not simply a choice by the Latino community to live in areas restricted to them (which also happened to be environmentally unfriendly). They did not have much of a choice of where they could feasibly live. It has been a result of a history of discriminatory land use. According to environmental justice experts like Professor Robert D. Bullard, public spaces in LA were “tacitly racialized” even though there were no laws actually in effect. Despite this problem, there are organizations out there that are promoting diversity awareness when it comes to issues of race such as the Latino community. For instance, LA councilman, Jose Huizar urged the California state governor and other state officials during February of 2016 to test and clean the homes in Vernon affected by the toxic waste of the battery plant in as fast a manner as possible.<sup>18</sup> Then there are several residents like Teresa Marquez of Boyle Heights who live in the lead contaminated area who have spoken out against the toxic waste along with other fellow environmental activists. As far as recognition of the problem outside of the Latino community in the LA area, there has not been very much of to speak of. There are different reasons for this, but one of the main ones could be that cases like Vernon are overshadowed by other ones like it such as the water crisis in Flint. Another reason for the lack of activism outside of the LA community aside from major news networks who have highlighted this issues like CBS, is the prioritizing of environmental issues (ex. putting air quality or plastic above environmental racism, etc.). The lack of recognition of the “race” aspect of a case like in Vernon is where part of the root of the issue lies. Moreover, even if it is recognized, it has been thrown by the wayside. Until people across the country recognize that environmental issues can

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon Walker, *Environmental Justice: Concepts, Evidence, and Politics* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 87.

<sup>17</sup> Robert D. Bullard, *The Quest for Environmental Justice* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005), 147-148.

<sup>18</sup> Emily Alpert Reyes, “L.A. councilman joins calls to speed up toxic cleanup around Exide plant,” *The Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-toxic-cleanup-exide-20160212-story.html>. 2016.



affect race issues, understanding racial diversity and cultural competency will be very difficult to comprehend.

### **Where Will Environmental Racism Goes From Here?**

The state of environmental racism will not progress as long as people do nothing to address it or go about the steps to progress in an unproductive manner. If environmental racism is left unchecked, it will in turn affect the other subcategories (pollution, climate change, energy usage, etc.) and overarching theme of environmental justice. Just like the ecosystem, not only those affect by it, but other issues interconnect the very basics of environmental justice as well, whether directly or indirectly. For instance, the minority group in this case study, the Latino community is being directly affected by the lead contaminated soil and water. It has taken a long time for them to even receive a fraction of help to clean up the mess. As a result, they find themselves a part of the environmental racism that has been left unchecked. This in turn fits into many other facets of environmental justice like water quality, pollution, etc. The only foreseeable way to fix or start the process of fixing environmental racism is by tackling the “racism” aspect of this issue. Yes, the “environmental” aspect of this issue is very important, but the racism part exists because people have made it an issue. Race in it self is not a definitive idea because some scholars argue that there is no biological basis for it, while others argue that it is a socially constructed idea, which people have worked into society. Once the “racism” aspect of environmental racism is solved, then it will make it easier to solve the issue behind the “environmental” part of this topic. There will definitely still be hurdles (different ones to be sure) to this issue, but at least the racism part will be diminished and be one less problem to attend to. Since environmental racism has been an ongoing issue for a while in the history of the USA, solutions to fix it are and will be ongoing.

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