H-Net Reviews
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Josiah Rector. *Toxic Debt: An Environmental Justice History of Detroit.* Justice, Power, and Politics. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. 332 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-6576-4.

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Published on H-Environment (January, 2023)

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In *Toxic Debt: An Environmental Justice History of Detroit,* author Josiah Rector traces the long and tumultuous history of disparities in Detroit's urban environment, focusing primarily on water deprivation and industrial pollution. He applies the concept "toxic debt" to describe "the trend of environmental load displacement by financial capitalists and the state onto urban communities of color, as exemplified by Flint's poisoned water and Detroit's mass water shutoffs" (p. 5). Rector is particularly interested in how the finance and real estate industries (and processes of austerity politics and expropriation) have contributed to present-day environmental inequality, arguing that over the past four decades, "debt and the politics of austerity have become increasingly central to the struggle for environmental justice in the city."

Toxic Debt is organized in three roughly chronological parts, each exploring an "environmental inequality regime" or "spatial order of environmental risk embedded in the urban political economy" of Detroit (p. 8). The first focuses on the regime of Liberal Industrial Capitalism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which mass production, proliferating wealth and income inequality, residential segregation, and municipal reform culminated to produce a waste-ridden river and a slum-clearing program that left Detroit's most vulnerable housing-insecure and most exposed to air and water pollution. Regulated Fordist Capitalism—what Rector defines as the second regime—lasted from the 1930s to 1970s and, by the end of the period, saw regulatory "wins" in the realms of fair housing, affirmative action, and environmental and workplace safety. However, increased regulation and deindustrialization in the 1960s and 70s also contributed to the drain of capital from the city. From this confluence of social and economic change, then, came the third regime—the Environmental Inequality Regime of the 1970s to the present. According to Rector, it was during this regime that "the deregulation of industrial polluters and predatory mortgage lenders, alongside the evisceration of welfare and public health programs, led directly to envir-

onmental health disasters for poor and working-class African Americans, especially women and children" (p. 9). Any reader who assumes this study is a declensionist narrative, however, need only turn to Rector's final chapter, in which he deftly chronicles the efforts of grassroots activists —particularly working-class women—to achieve environmental justice in all realms of society (water and air pollution, food systems, transit networks, energy justice, and waste disposal). Thus, Rector weaves together a multigenerational narrative of urban space and the battle to define, design, and defend it.

Rector positions *Toxic Debt* within "a burgeoning historical literature on the making of urban environmental inequalities in every region of the United States" (p. 4). In so doing, he joins a growing chorus of scholars from across the environmental justice and critical geography fields who analyze the urban political ecology of cities across the global North and South, tracing the interwoven threads of political, social, and economic power and illuminating how they construct and reconstruct urban space. Like Laura Pulido and Malini Ranganathan's respective studies of the water crisis in Flint, Rector illuminates the history of a city shaped by residential segregation, predatory lending, austerity politics, and governmental negligence.[1] These authors, collectively, demonstrate how and why low-income communities of color continue to be those most directly exposed to "toxic debts" in the form of air and water pollution, inadequate social services, and housing and food insecurity. Significantly, like scholars who have linked white flight/suburbanization to urban divestment, and restrictive covenants and predatory mortgage lending to residential segregation and redlining, Rector highlights the connection between municipal debt/bankruptcy and public service shutoffs.[2]

Where Rector's study stands out, however, is its ability to draw throughlines across a century of crises—from the industrial pollution of water and air during the 1880s to the water crisis of 2010s-20s; from the deadly typhoid fever outbreak of 1892 to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; from the Panic of 1893 to the debts leading to Public Act 4 in 2011—"suspended democracy" and emergency management of the city, the removal of utility bill assistance, and the water shutoffs of 141,000 residences between 2014 and 2019 (p. 194). In charting these parallels across Detroit's history, Rector maps Detroit's present-day water crisis onto the same racialized geography created by blight removal, residential segregation, and deindustrialization. Such a map highlights the interwoven webs of economic, environmental, political, and social decision-making that have resulted in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (quoted, p. 231).

A small but significant note is that Rector categorizes his study as "environmental justice history," a concept coined by Sylvia Hood Washington to position historical studies within the broader field of environmental justice scholarship (p. 6). This concept, on its face, does the very necessary work of connecting the fields of environmental justice and environmental history—a task that has been incredibly challenging but increasingly critical for scholars over the past few decades. Indeed, the field of environmental history has witnessed a shift from studies of the white environmentalist movement of the 1970s and analyses of the social construction of "nature" to more critical examinations of the power dynamics shaping our human and nonhuman environments. Due to its deeply theoretical frameworks and exploration of concepts such as racial capitalism, Rector's work seeks to follow in the footsteps of historians such as Carl Zimring in bridging disciplinary chasms.[3] However, environmental justice scholars have long been conducting the sort of history-informed environmental studies that environmental historians are now undertaking. This dynamic prompts the question of how the concept of "environmental justice history" distinguishes itself from envir-

onmental justice scholarship, and whether or not this unique category serves as a signifier of difference between the very discourses these scholars seek to join.

Given that battles over a "right to the city" and in Detroit's case, water access, are the core conflict of Rector's study, the reader might wish to see the efforts of Detroit activists more thoroughly woven throughout the book, rather than predominantly limited to the epilogue. Indeed, therein lies the great hope—that even as the city's powerholders move toward a "New Detroit" by "rightsizing" the city via blight-removal programs and green gentrification, even as unemployment and water shutoffs proliferate, even as the COVID-19 public health crisis exacerbated the state-imposed vulnerability of the city's most at-risk, Detroit's activists have provided the services critical for their survival. As the author notes, Detroit's community activists stepped in during the height of the global pandemic and "established alternative food, water, and energy systems as necessary adaptation to the failure of the dominant political and economic system to protect human health" (pp. 233-234). Like toxic debt, these forms of mutual aid also have a long history, and one worth exploring further in a study of environmental justice in modern Detroit.

Ultimately, Rector's study is a timely addition to a growing field and will be of interest to scholars across the humanities and social sciences. While his detailed analysis and theoretical frameworks may render the text a bit dense for a broader audience, Detroiters interested in understanding the deep roots of their city's history and current form will have much to glean from this work. Finally, ***Toxic Debt*** offers hope for the future of urban space by underscoring the work of leftist policymakers and grassroots activists in deconstructing the inequities undergirding Detroit and rebuilding to secure a "right to the city" for all.

Notes

[1]. See Laura Pulido, "Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism," ***Capitalism Nature Socialism*** 27, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 1–16; and Malini Ranganathan, "Thinking with Flint: Racial Liberalism and the Roots of an American Water Tragedy," ***Capitalism Nature Socialism*** 27, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 17–33.

[2]. See N. D. B. Connolly, ***A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Richard Rothstein, ***The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*** (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017); and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ***Race For Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

[3]. Carl Zimring, ***Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*** (New York: NYU Press, 2015).

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Citation: Carmen Bolt. Review of Rector, Josiah, *Toxic Debt: An Environmental Justice History of Detroit.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. January, 2023.

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