

Laura Westra, Bill E. Lawson, eds.. *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. ix + 266 \$69.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7425-1248-1.



Reviewed by Sylvia H. Washington

Published on H-Environment (August, 2002)

Human ecology recognizes that humans are part of the ecosystem and any negative impacts on this system will assuredly impact them as well as its nonhuman members. What happens (and what should be done), then, when only certain members of the human population bear the brunt of these negative environmental impacts? This question is the thrust behind ethical issues pertaining to environmental racism. The concerns of environmental racism were brought to the national forefront in the United States in the 1980s by intellectual and civil rights activists after a number of African American communities decried egregious and inequitable environmental assaults on their communities from industrial polluters and waste disposal operations that were producing horrific public health costs in the forms of cancers, miscarriages, asthma and other environmental illnesses. The concerns of African Americans and other communities of color, along with their political, social and intellectual supporters, culminated in the first Environmental Justice summit in 1987. The African American civil activist Benjamin Chavis, president of the United Church of Christ, coined the term "environ-

mental racism" to describe this phenomenon. This phrase was used to describe the now well-documented fact that people of color within the global ecosystem were being disproportionately impacted by negative assaults to the environment.

Environmental racism continues worldwide and the central thesis of Laura Westra and Bill Lawson's edited collection centers on the legal, political, economic, social and health issues surrounding its impact. Westra and Lawson state that this edited collection has been brought about to fill a void in the literature of environmental ethics. They have accomplished their goals by producing a collection that is an excellent intellectual wellspring on the subject for both environmental ethicists and environmental historians (since very little literatures exists on this topic in the field of environmental history). Critical of the environmental ethics field, the editors state that the literature that has often excluded the human dimension in the environmental discourse. This, they assert, is directly tied to the fact that the field of environmental ethics has a tendency to reflect the concerns and issues identified by environmental-

ism which is "focused rather narrowly on the protection of natural systems and species—on the nonhuman world" (p. ix). The same critique, however, can be made of traditional environmental histories with the exception of those urban or radical environmental histories written by historians such as Carolyn Merchant, Martin Melosi, Andrew Hurley and Chris Sellers.

Westra and Lawson's collection consists of three sections: "Foundations" (Part 1), "Racism in North America" (Part 2), and "Racism in Africa" (Part 3). All of the essays in the collection are original with the exception of sociologist Robert Bullard's "Decisions Making." What is satisfying about the collection is that the essays are intellectually diverse but complementary in achieving the section's objective. For instance, the first part of the collection dealing with the "theoretical perspectives" around environmental racism contains essays from a sociologist, Robert Bullard (who is considered by many to be the father of the environmental justice movement); a government policy analyst, Clarice Gaylord; and at least two philosophers, Bill Lawson and Charles W. Mills. The first section of the collection provides an excellent foundation for readers who are familiar with the issue of environmental racism or for those who are new to the discussion. From the historical to contemporary legal problems to the economic and philosophical problems that make it difficult for ethicists, policy analysts and philosophers to effectively discuss and address the phenomena, this section provides excellent background material on the broad spectrum of problems associated with environmental racism.

Although part 2 of the collection is titled "Racism in North America," this section consists primarily of well written historical case studies of environmental racism occurring in African North America, yet environmental racism is just as insidious in Hispanic communities. Many may consider this slant a bit unbalanced, but given the dearth of environmental historical monographs

concerning African Americans this collection is a temporary quencher for this intellectual absence and is like water in the academic desert of African American environmental history. The essays include a historical case study of the devastating public health impact of "human waste disposal pits" on Afro-Canadians living in Africville, Nova Scotia, Canada (1840-1950) written by Howard McCurdy. Westra's article, "The Faces of Environmental Racism: Titusville, Alabama, and BFI," concerns the well-documented case of racial discrimination in the environmental planning process for a Browning-Ferris Industries (BFI) waste reduction facility in the predominantly African American community of Titusville, Alabama. Daniel C. Wigley and Kristen Shrader-Frechette's article ("Consent, Equity and Environmental Justice: A Louisiana Case Study") is a case study of the PIB-BY (Put in Black Folks Backyard) phenomenon where the Louisiana Energy Services decided to build and operate a uranium enrichment facility in predominantly African American communities, anticipating the rejection of the proposed facilities by white communities. A final essay about Latino involvement in the environmental justice movement by Robert Melchior Figueroa elucidates the cultural and political similarities of this community's environmental issues to those of white and black communities. Although this is a well-written section, the last essay begged for a similar environmental justice case study for Latino Americans living in North America.

Part 3 of the collection, "Racism in Africa," is an ideological extension based upon the argument presented in the first part with documented case studies to support the argument of why and how environmental racism emerges in minority communities across the world, but especially in African communities. From devastating environmental health impacts (stemming from unregulated industrial outputs from petrochemical operations by multinational corporations in Somalia) to "toxic waste dumping in the Niger" this section offers only the tip of the iceberg of the "toxic terror-

ism" (p. xxiv) that plagues Africa today. To understand the collection's orientation and understand why this phenomenon is occurring in black communities, especially those described in part 3, readers should closely reexamine the collection's essay "Black Trash," by philosopher Charles W. Mills in part 1. In this essay Mills argues, "Conservation cannot have the same resonance for the racially disadvantaged, since they are at the ass end of the body politic and want their space upgraded. For blacks the 'environment' is the (in part) white-created environment, where the waste products of white space are dumped and the costs of white industry externalized" (p. 89).

Laura Westra and Bill Lawson have compiled a compelling set of essays for this collection which could only be improved if the collection consisted of two volumes, the latter of which would focus on other communities of color that also suffer from the phenomena of environmental racism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Sylvia H. Washington. Review of Westra, Laura; Lawson, Bill E., eds. *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. August, 2002.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6677>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.