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2017-12-08

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ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE: A DERIVATIVE EFFECT OF THE EXISTENCE OF INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM

By

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A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

May 11, 2017

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

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Abstract

Environmental racism functions as an injustice that is a result of structural and institutionalized racism. Environmental racism can be described as the disproportionate exposure of ethnic minorities to pollution that systematically places many blacks and other racial minorities near some of the most hazardous, toxic environments, due in part to poverty and segregation. These injustices, both carried out on a national and international level, perpetrate systemic oppression—as evidenced by our sending of waste to the Third World and Michigan's Flint water crisis. One key idea that will be addressed is how much more timely government responses would be given an environmental crisis in a more affluent community. Heavily polluted, mostly-minority areas around Oakland, California will also be analyzed in my capstone, pointing towards how environmental racism is a contributing factor to disparate health effects suffered by minority communities. Considering the state of health of minority communities as opposed to the state of health in more affluent communities would help to conceptualize whether the findings present any correlation to the proximity to toxic chemicals and dilapidated environments. In areas in which a denser population of minorities are present will there be a more pronounced proximity to hazardous environments. From here, I will introduce the concepts of institutionalized racism and how its effects ultimately affect the health and standard of living of disenfranchised communities. I will relate these concepts back to the environmental justice movement and how it aims to combat the detrimental effects of environmental racism.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound gratitude to my faculty mentors, Dr. Bronwyn Leebaw of the Political Science Department at UC Riverside and Dr. Carl Cranor of the Philosophy Department at UC Riverside for their assistance, encouragement, and guidance during the completion of this capstone project. I would also like to thank my family for their unwavering support.

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Introduction

"Unfortunately, Flint's water scandal is a symptom of a much larger disease; it's far from an isolated incident, in the history of Michigan itself and in the country writ large."

(Madeline Stano, Center on Race, Poverty, & the Environment)

The Global Citizens' Initiative defines global citizenship as the responsibilities and duties that come with identifying with part of an emerging world and exhibiting actions that contribute to building up communities' values and practices. The idea of global citizenship revolves around the fact that because we live in a more increasingly globalized society, we have an added layer of responsibility given that we are members of a world-wide community of people who share the same global identity as we. Part of this responsibility is centered on building a sustainable values-based world community. One such value concerning global societies is environmental protection. Environmental protection is a human right that should be afforded to all people. Although global citizenship offers a platform that pushes for the fostering of values in communities, I will contest that we are a part of a society in which systemic and institutionalized racism trumps the provision of fair environmental policies and protection.

The focus on environmental justice is derived from the notion that in society, environmental benefits and burdens are not fairly distributed. I will point to different cases, both national (U.S.) and international, in which socially and historically marginalized groups: the poor, African-Americans, and Hispanics, are disproportionately disadvantaged in regards to their environments. I will point to evidence that affirms racial

discrimination within environmental policy. As an identifying woman of color, the environmental justice movement is a fight that I am passionate about, because it affects the livelihood and well-being of people that look like me. Global citizenship allows one to understand the struggles that other members of society face - I only hope that this paper helps foster the conceptualization of the very real, pressing systemic issues that infiltrate present society and affect ethnic minorities.

By outlining the dimensions of institutionalized racism, I will then be able to highlight the framework under which the concept of environmental justice emerged, and the fight against environmental racism as an effect. The environmental justice movement can act as a lens through which the nature of modern society can be viewed, and can be a way of contesting issues of agency and power. My approach will be to discuss this movement and these issues in a more holistic way, pointing to how the manifestation of environmental injustice is nothing but an effect of the greater systemic racism instilled within society's political and social institutions. I aim to produce a think-piece that challenges the relationships between minorities and discriminatory institutions and discusses ways to redress the current inequalities. I will suggest in more general terms ways in which the effects of environmental racism can and have been combated, pointing to heightened political participation coupled with ideas of accountability and transparency. My argument will conclude by linking environmental inequity with health disparities between minority groups and their counterparts, and a brief critique analyzing possible cumulative impacts. I will instill a more critical tone, raising the question of

whether the current disparities persistent within environmental policies would be the same given a whiter, more affluent community.

Section I: Conceptualizing Institutionalized Racism

In order to better understand the concepts of environmental justice and environmental racism, it is helpful to draw an understanding of institutionalized racism. In an attempt to draw this understanding, I compiled a set of four notions that can help cognize the term. Institutional racism is a form of racism expressed in social and political institutions:

(1) Institutional racism is a form of racism expressed in social and political institutions.

(2) It is manifested within institutionalized policies, practices, and structures that create disparities that disadvantage minority groups.

(3) It affects the environmental rights of socially marginalized groups of people by denying access to basic natural resources such as clean air and water, subjecting them to disproportionate levels of environmental toxicity in contrast to their white counterparts.

(4) It generates exclusion from political decision-making processes and denies political agency to marginalized groups.

Institutional racism can be difficult to realize as it is not usually perpetrated by a single person, rather it is embedded within our systems making it harder to conceptualize and many times even notice. Systemic policies, practices, and structures that place minority groups at an unfair advantage constitute institutional racism. This form of racism, albeit subtle, is quite pervasive as it downplays the agency assigned to these marginalized communities, and affects their standard of living as well. (*The Law of Environmental Justice: Theories and Procedures to Address Disproportionate Risks*, preface, xxxiii) I found it helpful to derive a set of research objectives that I hoped to achieve by the end of this capstone:

A. Review the scholarly literature that has established that race is a determinant in environmental protection
B. Investigate the causes and consequences of environmental racism by comparing cases and reviewing the patterns
C. Examine the concepts of environmental justice and environmental racism
D. Analyze the challenges associated with legal responses to environmental injustice

The concept of environmental racism is a testament to the very real effects of institutional racism. Simply put, environmental racism is the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color. It can further expressed by the prevalence of racial discrimination in the enforcement of environmental laws and regulations and in environmental policy-making.

"*Studies dating back to the 1970s have pointed to a consistent pattern in who lives near the kinds of hazards -- toxic waste sites, landfills, congested highways -- that few of us*

would willingly choose as neighbors. The invariable answer: poor people and communities of color."

(Emily Badger, Washington Post, 2007)

Disparities in environmental protection illuminate how racism can embed itself within our systems and affect basic human rights. The environmental justice movement is a response to environmental racism. Though there is no universally accepted definition of environmental justice (*The Law of Environmental Justice: Theories and Procedures to Address Disproportionate Risks*, preface, xxxiii), it has been defined by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." (www.epa.gov) The environmental justice movement seeks to ensure that all groups of people have equitable access to a clean environment.

Section II: Legal Challenges within Proving Environmental Injustice

Environmental justice claims are difficult to hold in court due to the legal burden of proving direct intent to discriminate. The U.S. Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection Clause expresses that states may not "deny to any person within [their] jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws" (U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 1.), but this provision is not entirely sufficient, as a denial of equal protection requires proof of intent to discriminate. Essentially, if there is a claim one presents as a denial of environmental justice, it will not stand without showing that the discrimination was intentional. In the U.S. judicial system, the legal system has often not provided an effective response to

environmental justice claims because in the legal system these claims are problematically contested to necessitate proof of intentional discrimination, which is extremely difficult to prove. The Court later ruled that the intent to discriminate may be proven circumstantially – prosecutors can show that a seemingly neutral law has been applied in a discriminatory fashion or enacted with discriminatory purpose (Weinberg, "Equal Protection", Chapter One) If the circumstantial evidence is strong, then the prerequisite of showing intent to discriminate may be proven. In the 1886 case *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, an ostensibly neutral local ordinance prevented laundries from operating in wooden buildings. Prosecutors found that the 'neutral' law was enforced solely against persons of Chinese ancestry. The prosecution of 150 out of 240 Chinese and none of the 80 individuals of other races was selective enough, the Court ruled, to prove denial of equal protection. This landmark ruling affirmed that a significant disparate impact on different races is strong circumstantial proof of intent to discriminate.

Although the legal system can offer a basis for the implementation of rule of law as evidenced in *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, its limitations and challenges it presents in relation to the environmental justice movement lie in its failure to account for structural expressions of racism. The legal challenges necessitate intent and deduces discriminatory actions to merely individual acts.

Section III: The Environmental Justice Movement

As I familiarized myself with the environmental justice (EJ) movement, I found it rather interesting that it stems from a social justice and civil rights platform; the movement is a precise intertwining of environmental rights and civil rights. *Title VI* of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 "forbids discrimination by programs receiving federal

financial aid assistance." (Mank, "Title VI", Chapter Two) The aforementioned "programs" encompass almost all significant state environmental agencies. Adopting its own *Title VI* regulations in 1973, the EPA prohibits agencies from engaging in actions having discriminatory effects. The EJ movement adds a new layer of dimension to the fight for social justice in which aspects of environmental life are considered in the fight for civil rights. I find that this speaks to attempts of agencies to remedy injustices and provide actual accountability and transparency, and can be aligned with the interests of global citizenship. The EPA, in upholding new provisions and regulating company oversight, is actively promoting the tenets of global citizenship and environmental justice.

To further articulate the notion that institutional racism denies fair environmental protections for disenfranchised minority groups, I will point to research shows that there is in fact racial discrimination within environmental policy. I will contest that race is, invariably, a determinant of the level of environmental protection afforded. People of color and the poor are more likely to live, work and play in America's most polluted environments. Communities of color tend to be disproportionately exposed to lead, pesticides, and petrochemical plants. Unluckily, race and class is a reliable indicator of the location of polluting plants and waste facilities. As cited on the Environmental Justice Organizations, Liabilities and Trade website, "in the United States, decades of research have documented a strong correlation between the location of environmental burdens and the racial/ethnic background of the most impacted residents." (www.ejolt.org) It is no coincidence that there have been statistically significant linkages correlating the location

of these sites to the demographic of the people likely affected, and the linkages are concerning – they inform the rampant dehumanization of the lives of people of color.

Section IV: Establishing Patterns of Inequality

Figure 1: Map showing the most representative environmental justice conflicts in the U.S. (legend shown on right-hand side)

Source: Environmental Justice Atlas

The map on the prior page pinpoints sites of notable environmental justice conflicts in the U.S from 1970-present day. The legend (to the right) depicts in color the particular environmental issue affecting a given area and on the map, I controlled for ethnically/racially discriminated groups and indigenous groups/traditional communities, essentially communities that represent a marginalized and historically disenfranchised group of people. Two particular areas I focused on and detailed the effects were (West) Oakland, California and Flint, Michigan. Gentrification in West Oakland has displaced thousands of black residents, relegating them to housing areas close to heavy diesel traffic. Environmental justice groups within Oakland such as the Ditching Dirty Diesel Collaborative have reported that average diesel emissions in West Oakland, which is predominately African-American, is 90 times greater than the rest of California. The *Environmental Justice Atlas* cites the potential affected population at 30-40,000. Diesel emissions have health impacts that reduce lung function in children, in turn increasing risks of cancer and asthma. Coupled with these health effects, these communities also face displacement, loss of livelihood (reduced standards of living) and loss of landscape and sense of place. I used the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice (EJ) Mapping Tool to obtain a satellite view showing the correlation between density of minority populations and levels of Diesel particle matter in the air in West Oakland, CA.

The groundbreaking environmental justice report *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* found race to be the most potent variable for predicting where commercial hazardous waste facilities were located in the U.S. Minorities receive nearly 40% more exposure to deadly airborne pollutants than whites, and are consequently relegated to contend with disproportionate health risks. (*Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States)*

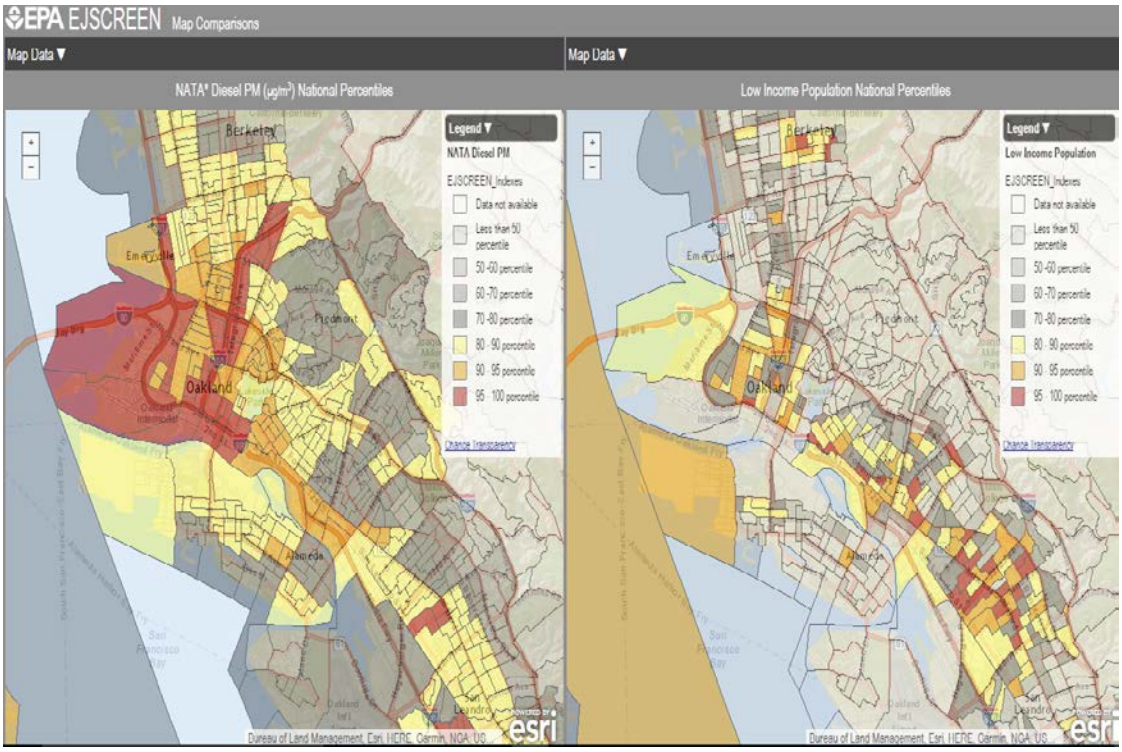

Figure II: Diesel PM (µg/m3) Indicators in West Oakland, CA (left) and Low-Income (predominately Black) populations in West Oakland, CA (right)

Source: EPA EJ Mapping Tool

On the map on the right, I controlled for diesel particulate matter (µg/m3) in the air in the West Oakland area based on national percentiles. As shown on the legend, the red areas indicate the highest levels (95-100 percentile), the orange areas indicate higher levels (90-95 percentile), and the yellow areas (80-90 percentile) represent still rather high levels. The map on the right indicates the low-income populations (predominately African-Americans) in the West Oakland community. My findings as I placed these maps together and compared the levels of diesel particulate matter in relation to the proportion of low-income communities effectively showed that there is a correlation between diesel levels and these communities. The areas with high levels of diesel particulate matter in the air show a greater density of low-income populations in relation to the areas outside the West Oakland area that show little to no levels of diesel particulate matter. Interestingly enough, as seen on the map on the right, the areas outside of West Oakland are areas with higher income levels and less levels of diesel particulate matter.

Diesel particulate matter is but one toxic environmental hazard that disenfranchised communities are actively exposed to. NO_2 is a byproduct found in vehicle exhaust and fossil fuel-fired power plants, it is also close in proximity to areas of color.

The University of Minnesota conducted a study "National Patterns in Environmental Injustice and Inequality" that concluded that people of color are exposed to 38% more of the deadly chemical. NO_2 inhalation is linked to asthma symptoms and heart disease. When researchers studied and compared NO_2 levels in urban areas across the country and within cities based on populations categorized in the U.S. Census as "nonwhite" or "white," the health impacts from the difference in NO_2 levels between the population groups found in the study are substantially significant. Researchers actually estimated

that if the communities of people of color breathed the NO_2 levels experienced by whites, it would prevent 7,000 deaths from heart disease alone among people of color each year.

Along with West Oakland, CA, the current environmental crisis in Flint, Michigan is a striking clear-cut example of the lax response of government officials to communities of color regarding their standard of living. The book *Michigan: A State of Environmental Justice?* authored by Bunyan Bryant concludes that the state is a "prime example of environmental injustice because it has a large industrial sector, a large number of toxic inventory citations, Superfund sites, brownfields, and hazardous waste disposal facilities located disproportionately in racially segregated communities and in communities of poverty." (Bryant, 103) The deadly impact of noxious industrial waste affects Michigan's poor as they breathe polluted air and drink contaminated water. Research has indicated that Flint's water has ten times more lead than Oakland water. The environmental impacts of this crisis has decreased water quality, increased surface water pollution, and may result in prolonged food insecurity and loss of biodiversity. Sadly, the health and socio-economic impacts of this crisis may be worse. Blood lead levels in children are unusually high in Flint and mental problems leading to depression and suicide foster loss of livelihood and lessened standards of living for these communities.

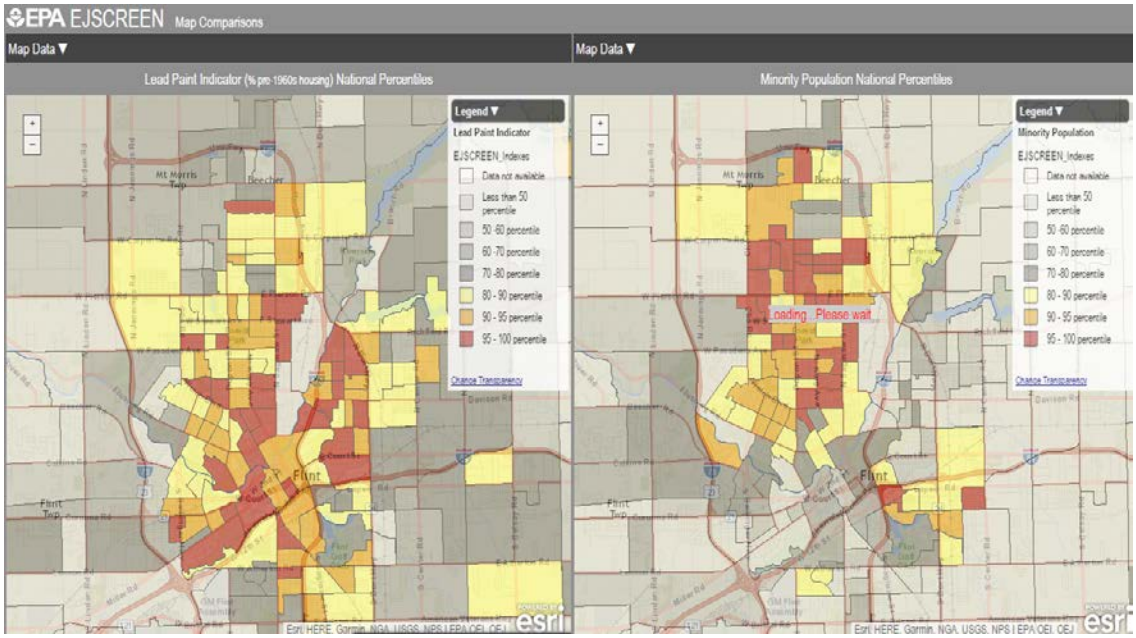

Figure III: Lead Paint Indicators (% pre-1960s housing) in Flint, Michigan (left) and Minority populations in Flint, Michigan (right)

Source: EPA EJ Mapping Tool

I utilized the EPA' EJ Mapping Tool in the same way to offer a bird' eye satellite view in Flint, Michigan. On the map on the right, I controlled for lead paint indicators in pre-1960's housing in Flint based on national percentiles. As shown on the legend, the red areas indicate the highest levels (95-100 percentile), the orange areas indicate higher levels (90-95 percentile), and the yellow areas (80-90 percentile) represent still rather high levels. The map on the right indicates the minority population density relative to national percentiles. Much like the case in West Oakland, placing these maps together indicated that the areas with high percentiles of minority communities was a rather clear indicator of the higher levels of lead paint indicators.

The levels of lead paint indicators in relation to the proportion of minority communities effectively showed that there is a correlation between lead levels and these communities. The areas with high levels of lead paint indicators show a greater density of minority populations in relation to the areas outside the Flint area that show reduced levels of lead paint. Interestingly enough, as seen on the map on the right, the areas outside of Flint are areas with lower minority population density and lower levels of lead paint indicators % in pre-1960's housing based on national percentiles.

Figure III: Side-by-side water samples from Flint and Detroit, Michigan

Additionally, the lack of a hasty government response to the situation is an indication of the sheer lack of equal protection that would otherwise be afforded if the community was not largely black and largely impoverished. Systemic racial disparities as seen in racial economic inequality and de facto government policies only accelerate the toll of environmental injustice which in turn impacts minority health and standard of

living. Yet another example can be evidenced in California's San Joaquin Valley. It is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the United States and its estimated annual gross value of agriculture totals over $25 billion. Still, the presence of pesticides, arsenic, and nitrate contribute to groundwater contamination as a result of developing agricultural production. Contrastingly, the Porter Ranch gas leak occurred in the affluent, white neighborhood of Porter Ranch and the hurried government response is one example of the differences in responses elicited by the government given a richer, majority area compared to a poorer, minority area. The gas leak was discovered on October 23rd, 2015 and by January 6th, 2016, Governor Jerry Brown had issued a state of emergency. The communities of Flint are still drinking contaminated water – three years later.

While studying the case of environmental injustice in the Valley, I realized that racial discrimination continues to be systemic and rooted in an economic model that denies environmental protection to the poorest minority communities. The region is home to a large Latino population, and holds some of the highest poverty rates in the state. There is in fact a correlation between ethnicity and access to safe drinking water. According to a new report from the *Center for Effective Governme*nt, of the 11.4 million people living in zones adjacent to dangerous facilities, almost half are people of color. The report found that they have nearly double the risk of whites living near those sites. A recent NAACP report cited that 78% percent of all African-Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant, which are generally associated with serious health complications, such as heart and respiratory disease and lung cancer. Studies show that people of color are exposed to nearly 40 percent more harmful airborne toxins than their

white counterparts. Approximately two-thirds of the 5.7 million children living within a mile of a high-risk chemical facility are from communities of color.

Section V: What Are The Implications?

Assessing the cumulative impacts of environmental policies takes into consideration the impacts of past, present, and future activities. The environmental decisions set in place now contain initiatives that will not only affect the lives of disenfranchised minorities but also the lives of their children. Heart diseases and other respiratory diseases that are affecting minority individuals can be passed down generationally. Research has shown a higher incidence of emphysema, chronic bronchitis and other pulmonary diseases in these communities. The asthma epidemic among African Americans have been linked to industrial toxins wafting over poor neighborhoods. According to the *Centers for Disease Control*, asthma affects twice as many black children as white, and the asthma rate among African-American kids has doubled from 2001 to 2009. Disparate environmental policies open the door to problems of health equity within environmental communities. Once the cumulative impacts are considered, the scheme in its entirety becomes indicative of a 'domino effect' - a crisis does not just stop after it affects one set of people –it has the potential to continue onwards.

As I began to compile these findings and notice this very real phenomenon affecting poor, minority lives, I asked myself: *if this now becomes a matter of life and death, why do environmental inequalities not constitute violence?* Indeed, environmental injustices such as Flint's current water crisis is only indicative of a much larger problem; it is symptomatic of the sheer disregard, belittling, and indifference of black lives and black

health, and emblematic of the very real environmental racism that exists within a broader context of structural and institutionalized racism.

Throughout this capstone project, I could not help but to think about what the future holds for environmental injustice given the Trump administration's current stance promising to deregulate and defund essential environmental protection agencies such as the EPA. The implication for this is that things will only worsen as problems are rendered invisible. There is a dire need for accountability within our government and political processes. Institutionalized racism, as aforementioned, is a stressing cause of the environmental injustices that we see today. These communities are largely impoverished, thus lacking any substantive agency or political knowledge to directly engage in decision-making processes. I find that if we are to ameliorate this situation, we should work to redress the current inequalities by providing these communities the resources they need to be fully equipped in contesting environmental injustices.

Section VI: Changing the Narrative

The evidence pointing towards inequitable environmental disparities within disenfranchised communities may beg the question(s): Why do these communities seem complicit in regards to environmental policy? Why do they not [seem] to voice opposition? The answer lies in the fact that the continual marginalization of these communities leads to reality that they often lack the organization, resources, and political power to resist hazardous, and in some cases lethal, environmental practices. Federal agencies such as the EPA and Department of Energy (DoE) have introduced initiatives aimed at remedying and preventing situations of environmental injustice. The EPA has initiated strategies aimed at encouraging public participation in order to help

marginalized communities form partnerships to reach environmental justice goals, promising to increase outreach and educate the community as a whole. (Mank, "Executive Order 12,898", Chapter 4) There have been objectives aimed at heightening society's scientific knowledge about environmental health risks. The DoE seeks to "improve its research and data collection methodologies relating to human health and the environment" (Mank, "Executive Order 12,898," Chapter 5, pg. 126). These measures work to highlight some remedies that have been set in place in an attempt to assign agency to disenfranchised groups.

Figure IV: A protester's sign highlights the visibility of environmental injustice

De facto barriers within minority communities alluding back to institutional racism results in a lack of political representation and lack of political and economic clout by the impoverished African-American and Hispanic demographic. As evidenced in

Oakland, gentrification results in minorities' disparate exposure to harmful pollutants. The lack of political and economic agency held by minority groups can be further dissected by the concerns brought up by the United Nations' Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent during their January 2016 visit to the United States. They voiced concerns that African Americans do not have the possibility to bring their cases or individual complaints to governing bodies either because they have exhausted their resources (financial, social) or because they are unaware of protocols and are essentially left out of political decision and policy-making. Environmental injustices focused on minorities do not deny that poor white communities and other socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are not affected as well, because they are, but U.N. experts observed that African-Americans are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards impacting their health and standard of living.

"Often it comes down to a question of who holds the power, whose voice counts, and whose voice is the loudest."

(Madeline Stano, Center on Race, Poverty, & the Environment)

The demand of enforcement of proper health and environmental codes necessitates political capital and agency. Without political influence, communities are excluded from stark decision-making policies that affect themselves and their loved ones. They are also less able to quickly mobilize against toxic facilities in their neighborhoods and often lack the economic resources to move. Seemingly neutral policies like Not-in-

my-backyard (NIMBY) can be problematic as the polluting facilities that the wealthier, white people do not want in their backyard are simply relegated to the backyards of poorer individuals with brown and black skin. Our capitalistic society is one that places the benefits of profit accumulation above the risks of vulnerability to toxins in brown and black bodies. The United States' active participation in sending waste to 'third world' countries in West Africa and Asia highlights the environmental pollution that is carried out in minority communities -- transcending national borders and infiltrating international ones. In instances where these environmental injustices are concurrent, prevention is better than cure. The efforts brought about by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy are a testament to the understanding of the greater problem of institutional racism that plagues our society. My collective findings concerning the disparate environmental policies affecting minority communities speak to a need for heightened accountability and transparency within our institutions. My findings and discoveries during this process has helped me understand the importance of dissecting the practices of institutions, instead of just accepting them as they are. As global citizens, we must be active thinkers and critique the processes and systems that contribute to the unfair treatment of individuals based on race.

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