

## Troubled Water: Understanding Environmental Racism

Until I was seventeen, I lived in an affluent, largely white community about an hour north of Flint, MI. As a teenager, we used to joke about our neighbors to the south, that any crime report on the evening news must have occurred over in Flint.

Perhaps we thought we sounded cynically cool in our bare bones knowledge of socioeconomic difference. What we really sounded was elitist, too privileged to understand the ways capitalism and racial injustice had left Flint behind. We had never seen Flint as the thriving metropolis it was under General Motors, weren't aware of the white flight that occurred when GM moved its plants to the suburbs, or the devastation of the city's tax base that followed. We didn't realize that GM had abandoned Flint, giving bottomline precedent over union-advocated worker's rights and leaving the city in economic ruin. If we had, we might have seen the parallels between our own one-horse town and Flint's current situation. We might have had a little more understanding of the nuance of it all - and some empathy, especially considering how easily it could be us.

My hometown is fortunate. They still have drinkable water. Flint, however, does not.

In 2013, the government of Flint was forced to make a decision about how to find a cheaper means to bring its citizens one of their most basic needs: water. They opted to build their own pipeline to connect to the Karegnondi Water Authority. Their current supplier, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, cut them off a year after they were informed of the change. The new pipeline was still incomplete.

As an interim solution, the city began drawing water from the Flint River. Almost immediately, complaints about water quality came pouring in. They were summarily ignored. The results are now all over the news: children suffering from lead poisoning, deaths from Legionnaire's disease, and a city still reliant, two years later, on bottled water.

It's important to note that people of color are the majority in Flint. According to the US Census, Flint's population is 57% black, 37% white, 4% Latino, and 4% mixed race. Socioeconomically, it continues to feel the effects of GM's relocation, with more than 41% of residents living below the poverty line. It has been widely asked since the crisis whether action would have been taken sooner in a different community, one where the average household income was a little higher and melanin levels a bit lower.

Probably, if history has anything to say about it.

To begin understanding that conclusion, let's start with a case in Houston circa 1979. Browning-Ferris Industries attempts to place a municipal solid waste landfill in Houston's Northwood Manor subdivision. The residents of the community, mostly African-American homeowners, sue. After all, in 1970, when a similar facility was suggested to be placed in the same area, the Harris County Board of Supervisors rejected the plan. The neighborhood had been mostly white at the time. Nine years later, residents of Northwood Manor lost their lawsuit. With a changed demographic now in residency, the facility was allowed to move forward.

Despite making up only 28% of the population of Houston, the city's African-American community had long borne the majority of its solid waste facilities. Since the early 1920s, all five of the city-owned sanitary landfills, six of the eight municipal solid waste incinerators and three

of the four privately owned solid waste landfills were located in majority African-American communities. It's a trend not isolated to Houston. A 1983 study by the U.S. General Accounting Office found that, despite being one-fifth of the population in the EPA's Region IV, African-American communities contained three-fourths of the region's off-site landfills.

In 1992, thirteen years after the Northwood Manor case, things hadn't improved. In a study conducted by its staff writers, the National Law Journal uncovered glaring differences in the way the EPA enforces environmental law across racial lines. "There is a racial divide in the way the U.S. government cleans up toxic waste sites and punishes polluters," they stated, "White communities see faster action, better results and stiffer penalties than communities where blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities live."

Current events indicate we're still on this unfortunate trajectory. While Flint's water crisis reads like another chapter in a long story of neglected and dismissed minority communities, the categorization occurs in (well-supported) hypotheticals. The protests at Standing Rock, ND, however, reveal a blatant and unquestionable environmental racism.

Like Flint, this story has to do with water. The Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), currently planned to pass directly through the Native American community of Standing Rock, is a threat to the area Sioux community's most basic resources. While the Water Protectors at Standing Rock face unceasing opposition in their protest for the stop of the pipeline, however, a white community was able to divert it away with ease.

The original route for DAPL wove further north, near the North Dakotan capital of Bismarck. The mostly-white community rejected the plan out of concern that a leak could seriously endanger their water sources. Their concerns were heeded, and the pipeline was rerouted - directly through Standing Rock.

Access to basic resources for the people of Bismarck was seen as something to be protected. The same standards were not held for the Native American people of Standing Rock.

This is the core of environmental racism. If environmentalism is the fight against the idea that our planet's natural resources are disposable, anti-environmental racism pushes back against mentalities that also view some *people* as disposable. Acknowledging that not all groups are treated equally is of central importance to achieving environmental justice.

For white environmentalists, that means looking at our implicit biases. Socialization has cursed us all with subtle bias. That often means that environmentally conscious folks don't become aware of problems in communities of marginalized groups. As long as society continues to have systems of oppression, as long as there are forces at work treating some people as disposable, problems in those communities remain hidden away beneath the radar. It is on us to make sure we listen, make sure we see. If we don't, we're going to be surprised years later by environmental threats we didn't even know were there - and social injustice that goes unnoticed for generations.

For starters, for me, that means no more jokes about Flint.

Background on the history of environmental racism sourced from Bullard, Robert D. "Environmental Justice For All." Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color. Ed. Robert D. Bullard San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997. 3-9. Print.