

## **OLOC End White Dominance: Environmental Racism April 22, 2022**

Environmental racism is a concept in the environmental justice movement, that developed in the United States and abroad throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Dr. Benjamin Chavis, a civil rights leader initially coined the term “environmental racism,” but there is a comprehensive definition that comes from Robert Bullard, author and father of environmental justice, who defines it as - “any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race.”

The term, Environmental Racism is used to describe the environmental injustice that occurs within a racialized context both in practice and policy which has been going on for centuries – even before the founding of the United States, when there was the invasion of North America by Europeans. Historical and present-day injustices such as the taking and desecration of land; the polluting of air and waterways, the deterioration of drinking water; the poisoning of fish and wildlife; and highway incursions and road deterioration have left Indigenous, Black, and Latina communities exposed to far greater environmental health hazards than white communities.

It is also how minority group neighborhoods - populated primarily by people of color and members of low-socioeconomic backgrounds - are burdened with disproportionate numbers of hazards including toxic waste facilities, garbage dumps, coal plants, oil refineries, and other sources of environmental pollution that have led to many diseases including cancers.

Without a doubt, racism influences the likelihood of exposure to environmental and health risks whether by conscious design or institutional neglect, occurring in communities of color in urban created ghettos, in rural poverty pockets, or on economically impoverished Native American reservations/lands where they face some of the worst environmental devastation in the nation.

These disparities are entirely due to power dynamics. The situation is simple. When government officials or other individuals or groups in power are faced with the decision of where to place the newest hazardous waste facility, dump site, etc., they typically look to communities filled with people who do not look like them or fall under the same tax bracket so it will not be in their backyard. From Gulf Coast towns in the shadow of petrochemical plants to Indigenous communities that are surrounded by oil and gas operations, generations of systemic racism have routinely put factories, refineries, landfills and factory farms in Black, brown and poor communities, exposing their residents to far greater health risks from pollution than those in whiter, more affluent places.

*In October 1991, at the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington DC, principles of Environmental Justice were drafted and adopted. Here is the opening statement:*

**WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR**, gathered together to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to ensure environmental justice; and, to secure our political, economic, and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples. When Europeans arrived, the waters were pure and the fish safe to eat. After bringing their new way of living, the streams, lakes, and land were

poisoned, and plant and animal life were harmed. All the institutional rules, regulations, policies, or government and corporate decisions have deliberately targeted certain communities for locally undesirable land uses compounded by the lax in the enforcement of zoning and environmental laws. And, the United States' federal government has known of this environmental injustice for decades. Presidents have promised to address it. But a legacy of weak laws and spotty enforcement has left Black, brown and poor communities mired in pollution and health hazards. The federal government's role in responding to environmental racism makes sense when you consider that it created the problems in the first place.

**Climate change** and racism are two of the biggest challenges of the 21st Century and are strongly intertwined. There is a stark divide between who has caused climate change and who is suffering its effects with people of color being most affected even though their carbon footprints are generally very low. And in other places it is due to profound structural inequalities laid down by a long legacy of unequal power relationships. Edward W. Said coined the word "othering" from his *Orientalism* book from 1978. He stated that othering is the disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people or geographical region." Once the other has been firmly established, the ground is softened for any transgression: violent expulsion, land theft, occupation, invasion. Because the whole point of othering is that the other does not have the same rights, the same humanity, as those making the distinction. This kind of recklessness regarding the climate crisis would have been functionally impossible without institutional racism; without "othering", without all the potent tools on offer that allow the powerful to discount the lives of the less powerful. These tools – of ranking the relative value of humans – are what allow the writing off of entire nations; ancient cultures; and communities. These areas are called *Sacrifice Zones*.

For some, it can be disconcerting to hear terms such as "racism" and "white supremacy" used in discussions about climate change. Climate change is often understood as an environmental issue, one that we are all in together, and therefore not something that could be in any way construed as racist. But global warming has resulted in disproportionately adverse effects on already disadvantaged communities such as indigenous tribes, people of color, rural communities, women, children, coastal communities, workers, and low-income households. Add to this, great vulnerability to heat, drought, fires, and floods and less resilience to the impacts of climate change. The issue is systemic: If you want to understand why 40 years of climate diplomacy has failed to bend the curve on temperature rises, you have to go back and understand racialized capitalism – how race is codified to justify the exploitation and subjugation of people and the legacy of their unjust structures remains and carries through into decision-making about climate change today.

### **We're being wrapped in poison'**

A century of oil and gas development has devastated parts of northern Oklahoma. Now the Ponca Tribe is fighting back. Earl "Trey" Howe III grew up in and around Ponca City, the site of the Phillips 66 refinery, one of the oldest and largest crude oil refineries and tank farms in the country. The smell from the plant — a sulfur-rich odor somewhere between rotten eggs and freshly paved asphalt — was so constant, he'd never even noticed it. Ponca City takes its name from the Ponca Tribe, a tribe that lives nearby. For more than a century, the region, in north central Oklahoma, has been ravaged by the environmental degradation associated with oil and gas development. From abandoned oil and gas wells to refineries, tank farms and hydraulic fracturing, the pollution and destruction — including damage from thousands of man-made earthquakes — have exacted a heavy toll on the region's air,

land, water and people. The resulting development has left homes enveloped in toxic fumes, black slime oozing from basements, emissions of fine particulate matter that can damage the heart and lungs, and walls cracked from earthquakes induced by injecting wastewater from hydraulic fracking deep underground. In one case, the fumes were so overpowering a family was forced to leave their home for several years.

**Here are some Actions:**

1. **COLLABORATE** with our Native/Indigenous sisters who are resisting the plans of corporations to further exploit and plunder the natural environment for private profit.

2. ***On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal by Naomi Klein***

Klein suggests that we need to overcome the disconnections of “movements”, and to strengthen the threads tying together our various issues and movements. This is the most pressing task of anyone concerned with social and economic justice. It is the only way to build a counterpower sufficiently robust to win against the forces protecting the highly profitable but increasingly unsustainable status quo. Climate change acts as an accelerant to many of our social ills (inequality, wars, racism, sexual violence), but it can also be an accelerant for the opposite, for the forces working for economic and social justice and against militarism by knitting together a great many powerful movements bound together by a belief in the inherent worth and value of all people and united by a rejection of the sacrifice zone mentality, whether it applies to peoples or places. To bring together a cross section of movements: labor, climate, faith, Indigenous, migrant, women, anti-poverty, anti-incarceration, food justice, housing rights, transit, and green technology. Develop a “yes” coalition – create a space to do something that is never done; the through diversity of who is “at the table/in the room” - to dream together about the world that we actually want and create a genuinely broad “yes” coalition. No falling back on a vision that is nostalgic or backward looking such as a yearning for a seventies-era nation that never respected Indigenous sovereignty and that excluded voices of so many communities of color.

3. ***The League of Women Voters United States***

Statement: As citizens of the world, we must protect our planet from the physical, economic, and public health effects of climate change while also providing pathways to economic prosperity. The integrity of the earth’s ecosystem is essential for the maximum protection of public health and the environment. The interrelationships of air, water, and land resources should be recognized in designing environmental safeguards. The federal government should have a major role in setting standards for environmental protection and pollution control. Local and State League involvement with education and projects.

4. ***The new Michigan Environmental Inequality Map***

A new map that was developed by the State of Michigan which is like the ones that have been done in California and Washington state. This map shows datasets from the US Census and State agencies and reveals the intersection of environmental degradation, socioeconomics and human health. Some of the major data shows toxic waste sites, contaminated waterways, and lead pipes. Another feature shows the prevalence of health conditions like asthma or heart disease, as well as demographic information like race and average income.

<https://egle.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b100011f137945138a52a35ec6d8676f>