

# Trading Human Health For Profit

by Nicole L. Warren

Welcome to "Toxic Town USA", formally known as Chester, Pennsylvania (Offman 1998). This Delaware County community, fifteen miles outside of Philadelphia, suffers from one of the many cases of environmental injustice, found in poor minority communities throughout the world. Over the years, residents of Chester have been subjected to severe pollution, resulting from the toxic emissions of several waste facilities in their neighborhood. Lead, dioxin, arsenic, nitrous oxides, and sulfur dioxide are just a few of the toxic chemicals emitted into Chester's environment on a daily basis. A *small* sample of the ailments residents are suffering includes: respiratory disorders, constant eye, nose, and throat irritation, increased risks of cancer, lung disease and liver and kidney toxicity (Howington & Viola). The pollutants and health risks present in Chester made it an appropriate choice for the EPA's 1995 study on the cumulative effects of continuous exposure to toxic waste.

Robert D. Bullard, director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University, is well acquainted with Chester's story, which is representative of many communities nationwide. He believes that environmental injustices are rooted in the practices of racism, adding that the existence of racial "discrimination is a fact of life in America", despite its illegal status (Bullard 6). Many African Americans have suffered mistreatment

from the housing industry, educational institutions, and from employers, all due to racial discrimination. It's no surprise that that discrimination should extend to other facets of American life. In the realm of environmentalism, another racially based injustice called environmental racism is occurring. The term, coined by former executive director of the NAACP, Benjamin Chavis, was created to give a name to the gross environmental inequalities imposed on poor, black communities like Chester, PA. Bullard reports "race has been found to be independent of income in the [disproportionate] distribution of municipal landfills, incinerators, abandoned toxic waste dumps, smelters, and other polluting industries" (22). Environmental discrimination, although not a new practice, has only recently, within the past 15 or so years, gained deserved attention. Despite the problem being revealed and publicized, a permanent, effective resolution has not been implemented. This is due in part to upper class citizens, who directly control the actions that influence facility site placement and policymaking, failure to recognize the devastation caused by environmental inequalities as human rights violations. Each citizen should be entitled to healthy and safe living environment. Bullard reinforces that environmental protection "is a right, not a privilege reserved for a few who can...escape or fend off environmental stressors that address environmental inequities" (Bullard 12). By addressing the problems of environmental injustices as human rights violations, the cause can be more effectively campaigned and resolved.

One of the main accusations made by environmental justice advocates is that the environmental movement centered on white, elitist concerns. Traditionally, as

Environmental Ethics editor Eugene Hargrove notes, environmentalism has focused on “environmentalists concerns, and these have not included concerns about human welfare” (Westra ix). The attention was given to protecting natural species and system, neglecting how toxic environments affected humans. This accusation is supported in much of the literature exploring suburban and urban life, where a common theme is found in the in their discussion of the exclusionary practices of the upper classes, and the effect their actions have on the general population. In this instance, their actions have been instrumental in creating the environmental disparities imposed on poor, minority communities. With their observations and ideas, Sharon Zukin, and Yi-Fu Tuan, are able to evidence the impact of segregational habits of the upper classes. Their respective books, The Culture of Cites and Topophilia, give insight into part of the foundation of the evolution and continued existence of environmental inequalities in present day society. Tuan also recognizes that environmental inequalities are “fundamentally human problems” (1), and Topophilia offers support for a human rights approach to resolution. The Culture of Cities illustrates how the symbolic economy created by upper class citizens of cities is another factor in the development and preservation of

become a part of what Tuan calls an “exodus into the suburbs”(226). Of note, among the reasons for the initial migration is the desire to escape from the threatening elements of urban life. People sought to segregate themselves from the overcrowding and pollution, and to find economic opportunities and better environments in which to raise families. One of the main, if not the predominant reasons citizens fled, was to avoid living with other citizens they found undesirable: immigrants, and the poor. Tuan confirms that the original Anglo-American inhabitants of the cities disliked “the twin defects of poverty and strange, therefore unacceptable habits”, of the immigrants and poor. In response to their presence, the upper classes relocated to the suburbs (229). The modern day threats to white Americans are blacks and Latinos, yet still today they are not able to admit leaving the cities for racially or culturally based preferences. Regardless of the catalyst for their inclusion in the suburban sprawl, the quality of life in the metropolitan areas they escape suffers. A brief history of Chester, PA demonstrates the impact of the suburban exodus:

Throughout the first part of this century, Chester was widely known as a center for economic growth, with companies employing so many people that they were small cities onto themselves. [...] Like many cities in the Northeast, Chester was hit hard in the postwar era. New technologies gave industries more mobility, and they began to consolidate and move out of the cities. From 1950 to 1980, 32 percent of the jobs in Chester disappeared. The economy collapsed. Much of the more upwardly mobile population moved away. Those that were left were predominantly minorities, transforming the racial makeup of the city. From 1950 to 1990 the population declined from 66,000 to 42,000. During the same time

period the proportion of the population that was African-American increased from 20% to 65%." (Kelly 14 Feb 1998)

Nowadays, sprawl is still occurring, as poorer citizens are displaced by the construction of roadways, mass transit systems, and strip malls that benefit suburban residents. They are also suffering in health, resulting from pollution emitted from waste sites, incinerators and other polluting industries that suburbanites and elite city residents don't want in their neighborhoods. Tuan credits the discontent of the wealthier suburban residents in part to the belief that by moving from cities to suburbs, the elite "lose human attributes in proportion as they are removed from the center"(31). The residents the upper classes desert are left to live in the "ruin" that they've created, including damage to the environment.

Over the centuries, the upper, elitist classes have no doubt maintained the influence they have on all aspects of society. Through the practice of exclusion, they have attempted to shun the perceived annoyances (poor, immigrants, blacks) from their communities. This is an effort to maintain what Tuan describes as, "the precision, the order, and the predictability" (152) of their neighborhoods. They have been able to achieve this by creating and continually implementing deceiving metaphors

controlling images in the cities for the benefit of visitors and upper crust residents, images deemed unsavory are removed or concealed. Zukin claims that this requires “controlling all sorts of urban ills, from violence and hate crime to economic decline” (Zukin 2). In an effort to create and preserve the cultural illusions of cities’ symbolic

economy of the city. To them, those buildings are not merely representations of their talent, upbringing, education and wealth, but representations of a flourishing city, or what Tuan calls "a human and







lack of substantial changes, suggesting that environmental groups have a shared opinion that “really reflects the larger society. And society is racist. And so we can’t expect a lot of our organizations not to somehow be affected by that”(Bullard 5). Although citizens would like to rely on the government and environmental organizations to act in

Chester. Behavior of politicians in Chester supports the idea that politicians often champion causes on the behalf of special interest groups, such as the wealthy that back them financially, and not on the behalf of the welfare of all citizens. Policies and legislation aren't always passed out of genuine concern or because they're the "right thing" to do. More frequently they're made as a result of the untiring efforts of grassroots organizations, often formed by concerned citizens. When citizens feel that the government has misrepresented or underrepresented their interests, they take action and form their own organizations to combat the wrongs in their communities. Injustices are avoided and eliminated with the "organized, knowledgeable, and effective community opposition" (Lazarus 270). Such has been the case with environmental activism.

Concerned, angry citizens in Chester, Pennsylvania united and took action. These citizens have demonstrated their topophilia by strengthening the "affective ties with their material environment" (Tuan 93), by fighting further damage to their surroundings. Formed in 1992, under the leadership of Zulene Mayfield, Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (pronounced "circle" and henceforth referred to as CRCQL) has been deemed "one of the most active environmental justice groups in the county" (Pokempner 31 March 2001). Since its inception, CRCQL has waged and won several battles against companies seeking permits to construct more waste facilities in Chester, as well as forcing existing sites to become legally accountable for the damage they cause. In addition, CRCQL educates their community about health risks associated with the pollution, and offers information outlining preventative measures. Many residents do not

have the financial resources to relocate, and must learn to adjust their lifestyles to Chester's toxic environment. It is extremely doubtful that Chester will be waste facility and pollution free, especially as long as its neighboring, wealthy suburbs can benefit from the current facility placements.



improvement of the environment in their neighborhood, but now focuses more on educating residents on identifying and addressing health risks caused by the pollution (i.e. their Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, established with money won in one of their law suits). Zulene Mayfield and her neighbors defied their wealthier counterparts who underestimated the power of ordinary citizens, thinking they were incapable and perhaps unworthy of successful bouts for their human rights.

Communities affected by environmental racism have allies in influential parties who are invested in securing human rights for all inhabitants of earth. At the World Conference Against Racism in August of 2001, environmental racism was recognized as “a human rights violation [...] caused by government and private sector policy, practice, action or inaction which intentionally or unintentionally, disproportionately targets and harms the environment health, biodiversity, local economy, quality of life and security of communities, workers, groups, and individuals based on race, class, color, gender, caste, ethnicity and /or national origin”(WCAR). Part of a proposed plan of action, to aid in the dissipation of environmental disparities, lies with demanding governmental responsibility and action. In order for the government to eliminate their deficiencies and take the necessary action, they must recognize and respect “the fundamental rights of all people to clean air, land, water, food, and safe and decent housing”(UNCHR). Zulene Mayfield is aware of the clout of the United Nations, and admits environmental racism is “a human rights issue. I mean, at many times we [CRCQL] had early on played with the idea of petitioning the UN for violations of the human

rights act, because conditions here concerning the environment we felt were that bad" (KWRU March 1999). The United Nation's Commission on Human Rights also recently revised their resolution on the Adverse Effects of the Illicit Movement and Dumping of Toxic and Dangerous Products and Wastes on the Enjoyment of Human Rights, affirmed that this practice "constitutes a serious threat to the human rights to life and health of individuals..." and urges all States to adopt and implement policies relating to such damaging practices. This recognition will have an impact on the struggle to eliminate environmental injustices, but it will also require the continued efforts of grass roots organizations, and wide spread recognition from officials and citizens.

Robert Bullard knows this, and asserts, "African Americans...have begun to treat their struggle for a clean environment as an extension of the struggle for basic human rights" (34). Activists and citizens have also become aware of the fact that hazards imposed on their neighborhoods are part of the slew of discriminatory acts against blacks. For this reason, the environmental justice struggle closely relates to the Civil Rights Movement, which is an extension of the struggle for Human Rights. Yi-Fu Tuan urges "that however diverse our perceptions of environment, as members of the same species we are constrained to see things a certain way" (3). Although all humans do not share the same perceptions and belief systems, we are all bonded in that we "share a common world", as a species (Tuan 5). Shared sensory organs allow all humans to touch, hear, see, smell and (with caution) taste their physical environment. From those sensory experiences, perceptions of a person's surroundings can be

formed. And although perceptions of the environment, whether they are positive or negative, vary from person to person, medical science has deemed the health dangers of environmental hazards a fact. Tuan urges, "that environments that are bad enough to endanger health require immediate action ..." (2). Poor, black citizens in urban areas are well aware of these dangers, but can the same be said for their counterparts in suburbs, or other areas of the city?

Zukin and Tuan have framed the picture of exclusion and illusion that fuels the practice of environmental racism. Tuan credits this in part to the elitist mentality of wealthier citizens as Zukin demonstrates how a symbolic economy allows them to play a "deceptive game of representations" (Zukin 10), to maintain a front of equality and cultural inclusion. Towards an end, Tuan, the United Nations and World Conference Against Racism participants suggest universal recognition healthy, safe environments as a human right of *all* people. Citizens are encouraged to



take vigorous, lasting action. As they opt to “trade human health for profit”, I’ll remain baffled by their inhumanity and insensitivity (Bullard 5).

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