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Well, We Saved the Polar Bears...

“Going green” in the United States means, “buy expensive new technology”, an inaccessible and non inclusive solution that almost defines the phrase, “bandaid on a bullet wound”. Discussions that involve climate change, deforestation, and environmental issues tend to stay focused on solutions such as water and natural resource conservation. It is rare that the media will publicize anything more on the state of the environment than criticism on the White House’s new policies or Tesla’s latest invention. Organizations like PETA and activist events like the 2017 “Science March” push for change in ways that surround the upper middle class, white perspective, saying that things like pollution are bad because they hurt “the animals”, the ozone, or the future, never admitting to or realizing that in many communities of color, across America, people are facing similar injustices today. This focus contributes greatly to burying the issue of environmental racism. Oxford dictionary defines this term as, “Racial discrimination in the development and implementation of environmental policy, especially as manifested in the concentration of hazardous waste disposal sites in or near areas with a relatively large ethnic minority population.” Solutions concerning environmental degradation need to better address the harsh realities of corporate America’s negative impact on air, water, and public health within communities of color.

Something as simple as the air one breathes is often compromised for people of color. This is a prominent issue throughout Latino and Black communities in San Diego, for example, the

predominantly Mexican community known as, “Barrio Logan”. Not large in size, but heavily overcrowded, the community is polluted by multiple waste disposal lots, a large naval ship repair facility known as NASSCO, and a bustling freeway built right through the heart of its residential area. (Union del Barrio) This does not go without consequence, but unfortunately the consequence is faced by its locals, and not those responsible. According to the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) and a non-profit San Diego news organization, “inewsources”, “Asthma-related hospital visits in the 92113 ZIP code fell within the highest 10th percentile in the state.” Additionally, the Environmental Health Coalition has found that “asthma hospitalization rates in Barrio Logan are 2.5 times the nation’s average.” Many of these polluters go unregulated. Not only allowed, but sometimes even invited by San Diego government in the name of economic development or “creating jobs”. They encroach upon the community, setting up within blocks of schools, homes, or public parks. Those in charge do little to prevent the damage done to the health of those affected. Thus, the children who account for nearly 40% of Logan’s residents are put at risk. This is not the only issue that air pollution has caused for Barrio Logan. Researchers have also found that Barrio Logan has, “higher amounts of diesel particulate matter than 80 percent of California cities.” (Bailey, Torrey). This toxin comes largely from the Interstate 5 freeway that, as previously mentioned, cuts through the center of the community. This is a worrying statistic considering that diesel particulate matter is a known carcinogen, meaning the community is breathing in cancer causing chemicals on a daily basis. This is not solely a concern in San Diego, Southern California, or even California. In the late 80s, a famous report in the world of environmental justice was released under the name, “Toxic Wastes and Race”. 20 years later, in 2007, the data was revisited and updated. Not much had changed. According to this study, “more than half of the people who live

within 1.86 miles of toxic waste facilities in the United States are people of color.” Another report done by the Center for Effective Government confirmed this data, showing that, “people of color are nearly twice as likely as white residents to live within a fence line zone of an industrial facility.”

Therefore, Barrio Logan is not an isolated example. Communities of color everywhere are having to deal with similar air quality, meaning similar health effects. Yet, San Diego and the wider US government still neglect to provide new zoning laws in order to protect communities of color like Barrio Logan. Instead, they sway in favor of corporate America, and allow for toxic industry to move in on these neighborhoods more and more each day.

More attention has been brought to the issue of environmental racism in light of recent political debate over water quality in Flint Michigan. The concern began when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that there were, “dangerous levels of lead in the water at residents’ homes”. Many of the residents, however, were well aware of this fact because of the murky colored fluid that came from their faucets. In Flint, many of the essential components of a functional water operation were found to be unmet or unregulated. Author James Vanderslice, Ph.D, of the American Journal of Public Health found these essential components to be, “(1) available water sources, (2) the physical infrastructure (e.g., treatment facilities, transmission, and storage), (3) operational/managerial capacity, and (4) government policies and agencies that regulate, assist, and financially support system operators.” If any of the factors stated are not carried out correctly or efficiently, it could lead to changes in the “quality, reliability, or cost” of the water. In many communities of color, the last of the four items is neglected, therefore making the rest ineffective. When a government does not give a neighborhood the proper monitoring of infrastructure, contamination levels, or the fiscal resources to maintain drinking level quality, situations like that in

Flint Michigan arise. In more extreme cases, like the Colonias in Texas or certain Native American reservations, entire populaces can end up with no piped water whatsoever. When studied in 2007, the American Journal of Public Health found that for Navajos, “30% were without piped water; more than 70% of water sources used for domestic purposes were positive for total coliforms, 21% were positive for Escherichia coli, 12% had arsenic concentrations above the maximum contaminant level (MCL), and 5% had uranium concentration above the MCL.” Many corporations have historically taken advantage of Navajo labor, especially in the uranium mining industry. The toxins that are created by the industries that exploit the tribe’s poverty end up in the water meant to keep them alive. Further aggravating the issue, the US federal government does not provide adequate oversight over reservations’ access to water or its quality, leading to further abuses by corporations. For similar reasons, many migrant farmworker communities are also found to have water with high levels of pesticides or nitrates, poor overall sanitation, and “grossly inadequate” water systems, many of which are makeshift due to the high rates of extreme poverty or the inability to buy a home. Even in more populated regions, these problems persist, affecting people of color disproportionately. The California Environmental Justice Coalition for Water found that areas with the highest amount of water violations were 42% Latino. Race played more of a factor even than socioeconomic status where people in poverty only accounted for 17% in the same areas. However, as the aforementioned cases show, the worst results come when the two are combined. Once again, these are several of the thousands of cases of environmental racism not being addressed by the US government. Despite an immense outrage over the current issues in Flint, the scope of water injustice in America goes largely unaddressed.

As was shown with air pollution in Barrio Logan, the worst effects of environmental injustice are its impact on public health. In many Black communities throughout the US, lead poisoning is anything but uncommon. In fact, in Chicago, a city that is 33.8% African American and 22.8% Latino, “approximately 17.3% of children tested were found to have an elevated blood lead level.” (Chicago Department of Public Health). This is a plight dealt with by more than 400,000 of the nations children, their desperate families not included. As stated by the Chicago Department of Public Health in, *Lead Safe Chicago: A Plan to Eliminate Childhood Lead Poisoning In Chicago* by 2010, the physical responses to lead exposure are, “kidney damage, severe anemia, impaired hearing and stunted growth.” or even seizures or death. This means that in Chicago, families are having to deal with possibly detrimental health effects over an issue that is completely out of their control, many them having little to no resources to spare on the cost of healthcare or treatment. These minimal resources could also mean that the effects of exposure are unaddressed, worsening until they are at the point of needing immediate care. In addition, having elevated blood lead levels, “damages the central nervous system resulting in reduced intelligence, shortened attention span and behavior problems, including aggression.” This does not include the study’s later mentioned learning disabilities, language processing disorders, lower reading scores, and connection between exposure to lead and children in juvenile detention. The behavioral aspects are even more difficult to address because many adults already stereotypically associate this rowdiness or lack of comprehension with children of color. A child will more likely be reprimanded for their compromised brain development than be treated for it. Moreover, the connection between exposure and juvenile detention shows how the behavioral issues in question are contributing to the cycle of poverty. Children who end up in trouble with the justice system are more likely to stay poor and stay in the same neighborhood. Lead

poisoning is something that will continue to affect future generations. The most common way that children are exposed to lead is through, “deteriorated lead based paint” In Chicago 2004, 92% of home lead inspections were still ending up positive. Who is most at risk? “African American children are 12 times more likely and Hispanic children are 5 times more likely than white children to have elevated blood lead levels.” Even more specifically, the most at risk age is toddlerhood, from ingesting the material on their hands after crawling on the floor. Once again, those most at risk are the most vulnerable. This report is an example of a government attempt to now address an issue that has been long neglected. Although their attempts are important, for the children or now adults who have lived in these conditions their whole lives, it may be too late.

When talking about environmental racism, some assume that much of the data compiled has more to do with coincidence or cheap land than actual racism. This would be a comfortable explanation, however it is far from the truth. Stated clearly in an article published by the University of Dayton, “Agency penalties for violation of the hazardous waste laws are 500% higher in predominantly White communities than in communities with a high percentage of people of color.” This would not happen if there were not a general apathy toward the health and safety of minority neighborhoods. In a study done between 1965 and 1995, researchers discovered, “a consistent pattern over a 30-year period of placing hazardous waste facilities in neighborhoods where poor people and people of color live.” As put by the University of Michigan, the study concluded that “Racial discrimination in zoning and the housing market, along with siting decisions based on following the path of least resistance, may best explain present-day inequities.” This is something replicated, once again, in Barrio Logan. In February of 1967, the city of San Diego decided to begin construction on a bridge that would connect residents on the mainland to a peninsula beach

community called Coronado. Clearly seen when observing the architecture of this bridge, and widely known through oral history, the project displaced a large portion of the community as it was built directly in “the path of least resistance.” Without government representation and widespread apathy from those in charge, the bridge became the eyesore, and later cause of the aforementioned public health issues, of Barrio Logan. However, in Coronado, a rare for South San Diego 75% white community, the bridge nicely cascades into an uninterrupted golf course, touching little but the southeastern corner of the island. This in itself is a metaphor for the greater issue. The respect given to white communities comes at the cost of black and brown communities. In the American Journal of Public Health’s 1997 publication, an article titled Environmental Racism and Public Health came toward its final remarks with this quote, “To discount racism as a potential contributor to disparities in health by race and ethnicity is to ignore well-established social history, not to mention the experience of many afflicted persons. Denial serves to perpetuate inequity. It also forecloses studies of racism focusing specifically on ill health and premature mortality.” Racism in our society is what allows for “cheap land” to be worth more than the health and longevity of communities of color. Institutionally, a corporation has more power than the people that they will be impacting.

U.S. Representative Keith Ellison once said, “We [people of color] carry the environmental burden even though we don’t create it. I don’t know any African Americans that own coal plants but we suck in all the lead and mercury. We bear a disproportionate environmental burden but we don’t contribute nearly as much to the problem.” What needs to be realized about our environment is that its destruction does not happen at an equal rate. Communities of color have been witness to the hardships of industrialization since the beginning, while our society is only now coming to understand its implications for the future. Instead of targeting citizens with ideas that involve buying

overpriced organic produce or using less water bottles, policy, activism, and media should be targeting the corporations that are doing the most damage. The restoration of our planet should not be something that is solely dependent the individual, but on the companies that profit off of the crumbling Earth beneath their feet.

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