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Humanities

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Well, We Saved the Polar Bears...

Coverage on environmental issues comes from an upper class white perspective when the people really suffering are low income people of color. Solutions concerning environmental degradation need to better address the harsh realities of corporate America's negative impact on air, water, and public health within black and brown communities.

Barrio Logan, is polluted by multiple waste disposal lots, a large naval ship repair facility, and a freeway in its residential area. According to the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA), "Asthma-related hospital visits in the 92113 ZIP code fell within the highest 10th percentile in the state." Many of these polluters go unregulated, sometimes even invited by San Diego government in the name of economic development. This is not solely a concern in San Diego, Southern California, or even California. A report called "Toxic Wastes and Race" found that, "more than half of the people who live within 1.86 miles of toxic waste facilities in the United States are people of color." Yet, communities of color go without protection. Instead, our government sways in favor of corporate america, and allows for toxic industry to move in on these neighborhoods more and more each day.

In Flint Michigan, a predominantly black/low income community, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that there were, "dangerous levels of lead in the water at residents' homes". 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 this arise. In more extreme cases, like the Colonias in Texas or certain Native American reservations, entire populaces can end up with no piped water. When studied in 2007, the American Journal of Public Health found that for Navajos, “30% were without piped water”. The rest of the water was highly contaminated from mining corporations that exploit Navajo labor. 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. Even in more populated regions, these problems persist, affecting people of color disproportionately. Despite an immense outrage over the current issues in Flint, the scope of water injustice in America goes largely unaddressed.

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) Lead poisoning can lead to physical, psychological, and behavioral damage. Connections have also been made between lead exposure and children in juvenile detention. 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 that lead exposure is one of many contributors to the cycle of poverty. “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.” (Chicago Department of Public Health)

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.” 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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